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WHERE THE DEVIL ROAMS IS A MIND-BLOWER

BLACKOUT: LARRY FESSENDEN'S LYRICAL LYCANTHROPE

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O Holy Shit!
IT'S A Wonderful KNIFE

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THE SACRIFICE GAME FLIPS THE SCRIPT

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THE ADAMS FAMILY KNOWS *WHERE THE DEVIL ROAMS*

HORROR, HAIR, AND HEART: INSIDE LARRY FESSENDEN'S BLACK OUT

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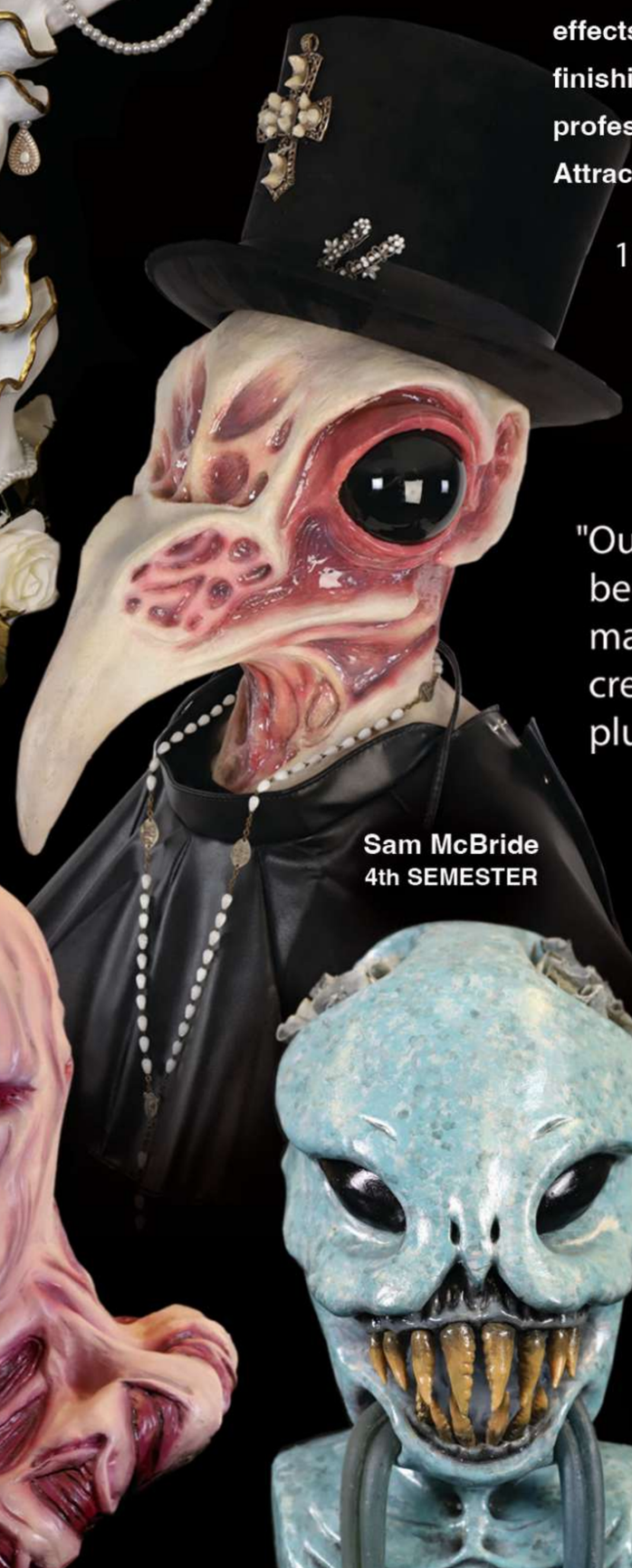

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WINTER 2024

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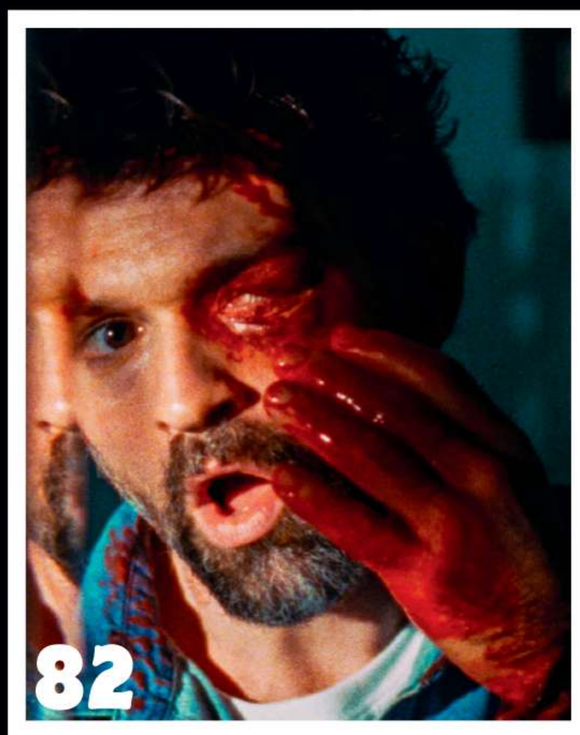

ON OUR COVER: (SUBSCRIBER VARIANT) *IT'S A WONDERFUL KNIFE* PHOTO COURTESY OF GLASS EYE PIX · (NEWSSTAND VARIANT) *BLACKOUT* PHOTO COURTESY OF RLJE & SHUDDER · PHOTO BY ALICE XANDRA THIRTEEN

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This issue is dedicated to Jeff Burr, Anthony Hickox, Doug Jones and Lara Parker.

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INVOCATION

Regional Reign

As a kid, a successful filmmaker was, to me, a pretty binary proposition. There was me, and there were Filmmakers: a group of people on the other side of some imaginary hill in my mind, who all got to make movies. I had no idea what a "regional filmmaker" was. They were all just, as far as I was concerned, living the dream.

Thanks to magazines like FANGORIA, I gradually became aware that some of these folks were living the dream thousands of miles from mythical Hollywood. Here was a guy from Michigan, making a movie with his friends in a cabin in Tennessee. Here was a stubbornly original filmmaker in Toronto who, even after evolving to studio-backed fare, made Hollywood come to him. Here were a handful of freaks just 40 miles away in New York City making a string of low-budget bangers. Here was a filmmaker and his loyal team creating all-time classics in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

I gradually came to realize that regional filmmakers were in fact the lifeblood of horror, saving the genre from a dying studio system and carrying the torch when the filmmakers of the New Hollywood movement went another way. And the beauty of regional filmmakers is they're still being discovered, as labels like Severin, Vinegar Syndrome and TerrorVision continue to unearth and find value in vintage regional shockers we never heard of back in the day.

All of this to say that it is completely coincidental, but no less awesome, that this issue happens to be so heavy on regional horror. Larry Fessenden's *Blackout*, shot in upstate New York, is a new classic from maybe one of America's most important regional filmmakers (that last sentiment is delved into from both sides of the screen this issue, as columnists Michael Gingold and Barbara Crampton celebrate the impact Fessenden has had on the genre). *The Sacrifice Game* is another eerie East Coast effort (though lensed in Canada), made by Fessenden's Glass Eye Pix producer Jenn Wexler. The Adams Family is back with *Where the Devil Roams*, in which they use their signature Catskills locations to creepy, wintry effect. And Erik Bloomquist's *Founders Day*, produced in Connecticut, aims for nothing less than the resurrection of the regional slasher film, playing like a polished, grown-up version of those vintage slashers who found their distance from Los Angeles to be an asset, not a hindrance.

Maybe the most important thing about regional horror is it paints an organic picture of American filmmaking, pure and uncut, unfettered by studio notes or marketing data, and it is something more of us should be pointing to when anyone derisively equates "American movies" with "Hollywood product." Because the regional chillers found in the following pages are American movies through and through, but they're neither Hollywood, nor product.

Phil Nobile Jr., Editor-in-Chief

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WHERE'S THE DAMN NUN!?

I am usually quite fond of the subscriber cover features and must admit I occasionally find I must double dip and spring for purchasing a newsstand edition as well. However I do have one small frustration and disappointment: the absence of one of horror's iconic monsters of modern days -- *The Nun*'s Valak -- from both a cover appearance as well as a nice feature article in the pages. Volume 2 of FANGORIA wasn't launched in time for *The Conjuring 2* features, and *The Nun* received only a small peak behind the scenes. I was hoping with 2023's sequel *The Nun II*, it would be prime time for Valak to haunt either the subscriber or newsstand covers, or at the very least warrant an article in the pages. But as yet not even a mention the film exists and looking at the reveal of the upcoming winter subscriber issue cover it appears ol' Valak once again is being skipped over.

- Chad Miller

Chad, you'll be surprised to learn I agree with you! Sadly we are at the mercy of our quarterly calendar and the cooperation of studios, neither of which worked in our favor for The Nun II. *The film, alas, came out between issues; October would have been too late and July was too early for the studio to cooperate. Compounding matters was that the SAG-AFTRA strike kept Bonnie Aarons (who we love!) from promoting the film. I was disappointed! There's always* The Nun III... *- PN*

LUCKY TO HAVE SO MUCH CHUCKY

What do you think makes people keep coming back to the *Child's Play / Chucky* franchise after 30+ years?

-Bri Monserrate

The phenomenon is certainly an interesting one, Bri. The Chucky *franchise, against all odds and logic (and a poorly-received reboot), has maintained a single continuity for 35 years. That we have new Chucky stories in 2023 featuring the same creative team is akin to James Whale directing Boris Karloff in another Frankenstein movie in 1966. It boggles the mind!*

One would have assumed there was a pretty low ceiling to just how much you can wring out of a "possessed killer doll" premise, but I think we're all pretty happy to be wrong, and that comes down to the vision, patience and persistence of creator Don Mancini and producer David Kirschner. The narrative of Don slowly taking back control of his creation, and using it over the years to both explore themes relevant to him and to lampoon pop culture, all while never getting narratively complacent or stagnant, is one of the legitimately feel-good stories of the horror scene. I don't know anyone not rooting for Don. - PN

WANTED! MORE READERS LIKE:

KayCee

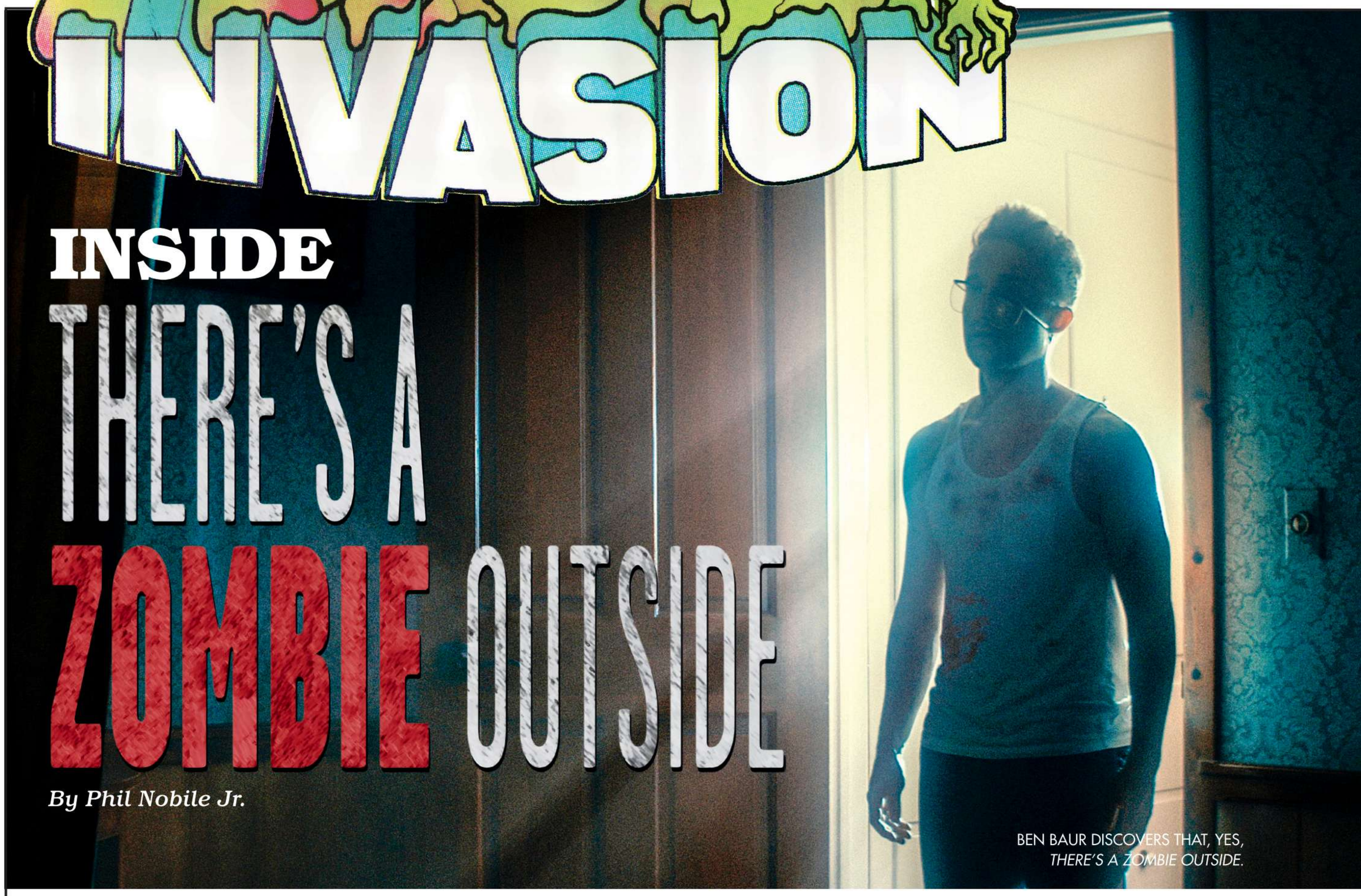
Devon Sawa
photo: Kyra Gardner & Alterian Inc

CORRECTION: In our last issue we misspelled Devon Hunt's name in our *Saint Drogo* article, and Eddie Alcazar's name in our *Divinity* article. Apologies, Devon and Eddie!

MONSTER INVASION

INSIDE THERE'S A ZOMBIE OUTSIDE

By Phil Nobile Jr.



BEN BAUR DISCOVERS THAT, YES, *THERE'S A ZOMBIE OUTSIDE.*

MICHAEL VARRATI'S DIY HORROR IS MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE (SOCKET).

Have you noticed that a lot of modern horror struggles to come up with memorable titles lately? We won't name underwhelming names here, but even some of the best horror films of the past couple years have been saddled with titles that, for reasons best left to brain and linguistics specialists to determine, do not stick in the mind.

If nothing else, Michael Varrati's *There's A Zombie Outside* avoids that particular contemporary pitfall. Like such classic films as What *Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, *We Need To Talk About Kevin* or *This Is Spinal Tap*, Varrati's new film takes as its moniker a complete sentence, leaving nebulous one- and two-word titles in the dust. Speaking for the entire horror journalism community, we thank him for this.

And like those classic films, the plot of Varrati's movie goes deeper than its eponymous premise: Having defined much of his life via his connection to cult cinema, a down-on-his-luck creative (Ben Baur) finds that he's facing another year with very little to show for it — a scenario relatable to anyone enduring the pandemic/strike-stricken film industry of the 2020s. Then, while mourning his artistic drought, things become complicated when he begins to believe that he's seeing one of the monsters from his movies for real.

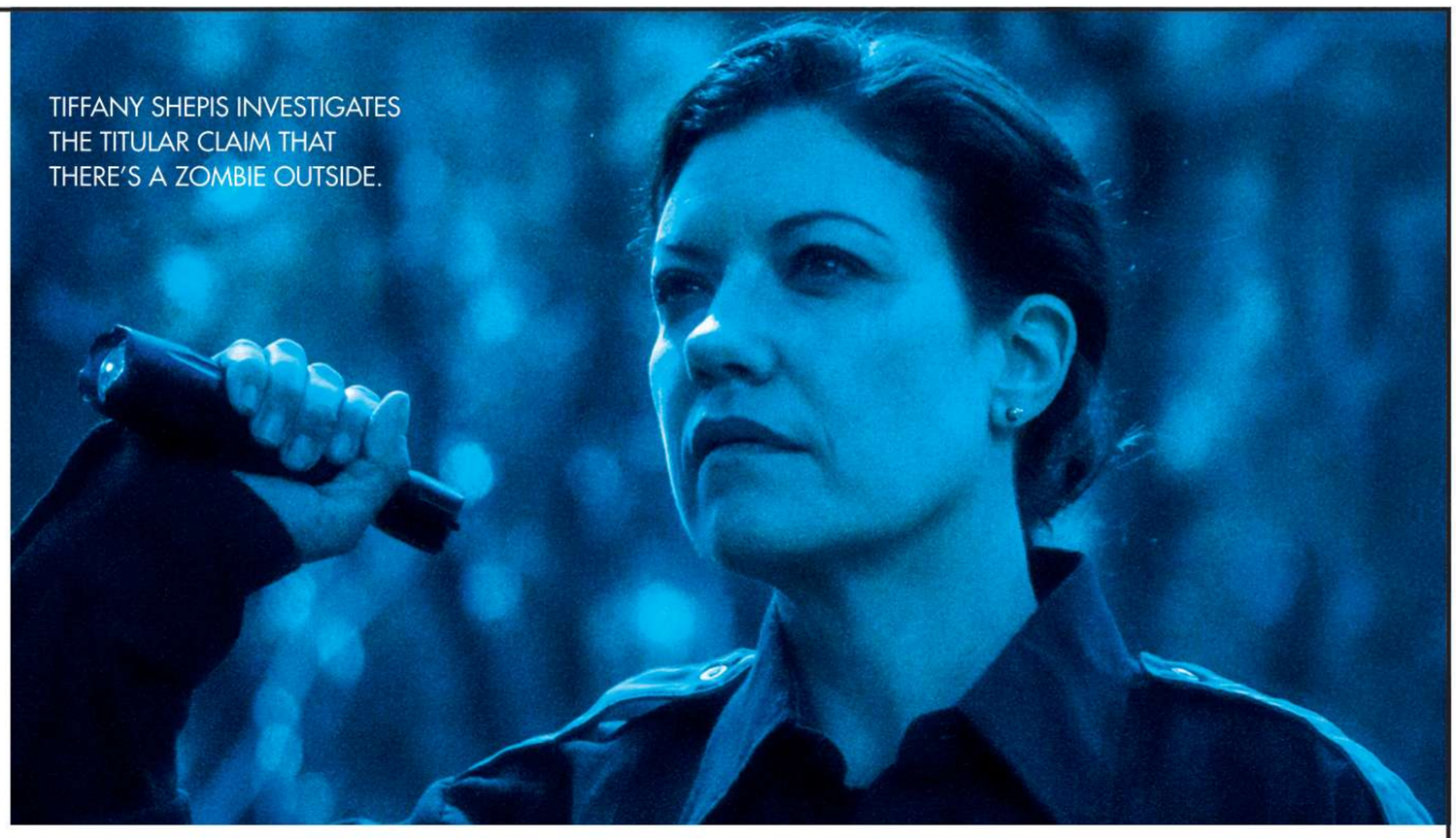
Varrati (whose name Fango loyalists might recognize as not only a contributor to this very magazine, but as the director and writer of *The 2023 FANGORIA Chainsaw Awards*) promises a mind trip of a film "where the lines between fact and fiction are dangerously blurred," and describes it as "a cautionary tale about the measure of control we give to the art to which we devote ourselves."

The press materials for the film note that the project was "born out of very real industry frustrations," adding that "this movie is an exploration of what happens when the casual cinematic escapism of

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JUNE GLOOM PRODUCTIONS AND MICHAEL VARRATI

one person becomes the defining attribute of another… and how sometimes seeing ourselves solely through art can lead to a disconnect of monstrous proportions."

Centering as its lead a creative who lives and breathes horror, *There's A Zombie Outside* sounds like something of an autobiographical piece from the filmmaker, whose genre work includes the award-winning workplace thriller *The Office is Mine*, the techno-horror U*nusual Attachment*, and multiple seasons of *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula*. But Varrati resists the 1:1 comparison: "I'm not entirely sure I think of it as autobiographical in the traditional sense. I give a little bit of myself to every script that I write, so they all are still 'mine' in a way… but film is collaborative and the end result of any project is a combined effort of so many artists and hard-working people."

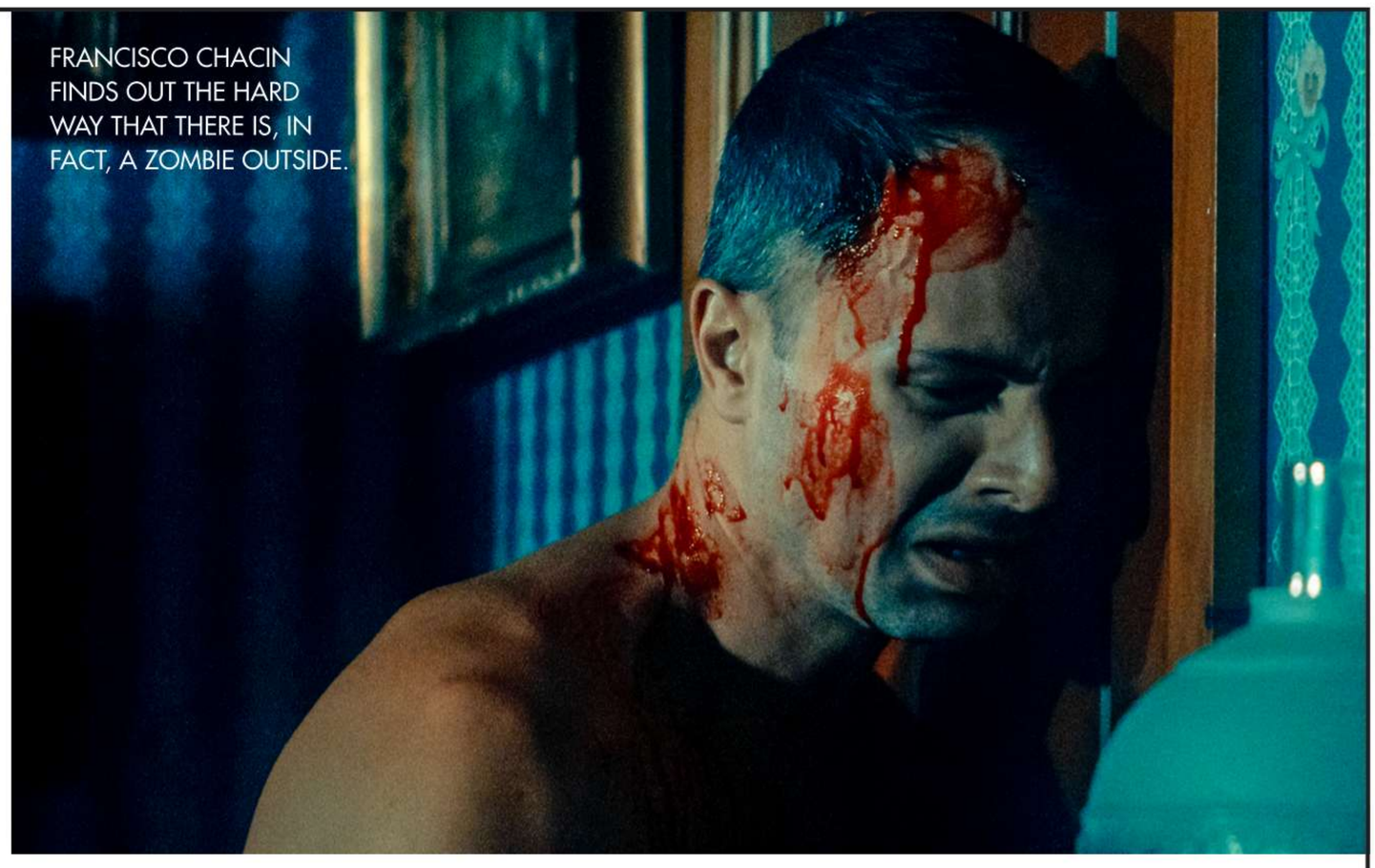


TIFFANY SHEPIS INVESTIGATES THE TITULAR CLAIM THAT THERE'S A ZOMBIE OUTSIDE.

And Varrati assures FANGORIA that, autobiographical or not, the project doesn't skimp on scares. "It's absolutely true that the frustrations and struggles of the main character were informed by an amalgamation of my own experiences and those within our creative team, but we definitely pushed it to darker, more unsavory places in the film — as horror is wont to do."

But when pressed, the filmmaker admits that this film is a bit more personal for him than some of his other endeavors. "Most tangibly, the movie is a response to a very real struggle that many queer artists in genre tend to experience, and the weird compartmentalization that happens when horror fans don't want to engage with your stuff because it's 'too queer' and the

DANNY PLOTNER IN THE TITLE ROLE (I.E., THE ZOMBIE THAT'S OUTSIDE).



FRANCISCO CHACIN FINDS OUT THE HARD WAY THAT THERE IS, IN FACT, A ZOMBIE OUTSIDE.

queer arts scene does the same because it's 'too horror.'" While it's true that queer horror is having a moment, Varrati hopes his project can expand the boundaries of the subgenre and widen the conversation. "There's such a push to explore 'queer joy' in the creative space, but queer listlessness is real too. I wanted to explore that purgatory we don't ever talk about," he says, "and how it can make inertia seem monstrous."

In fact, so personal was this project to the filmmaker, it was made as a truly DIY production. "This film was made completely independently. When you're working for a studio or network, there's often some goalpost you all have to work in unison to achieve. A project like this is different in that we got to set our own goalpost. That's not my pinnacle for every project, but it was crucial for this one. We were able to address themes and topics we know someone else wouldn't have allowed. We gave ourselves permission to be weird."

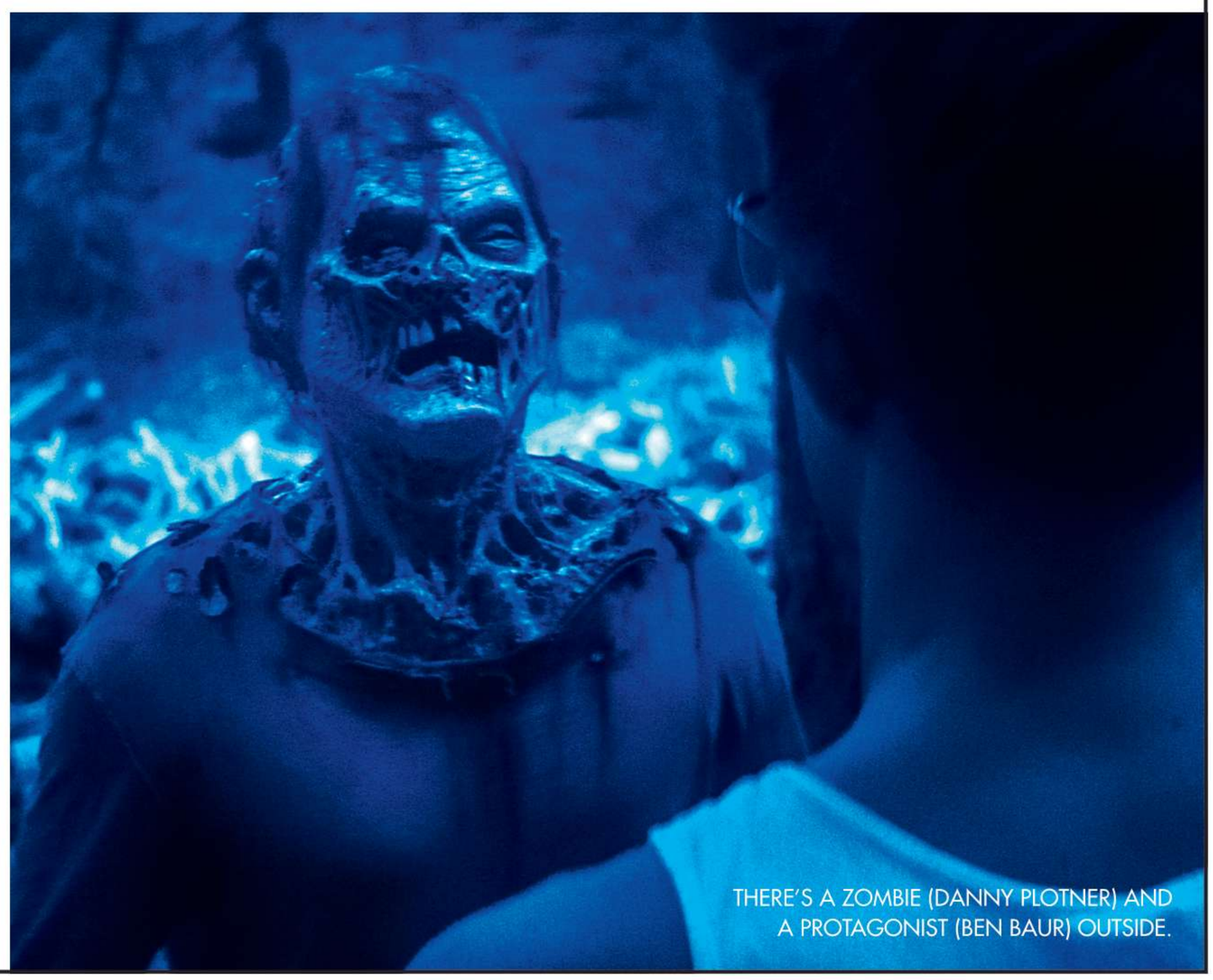
Aiding Varrati in his macabre mission alongside his lead Baur (*Hunting Season*) are Phylicia Wissa (*Santa Clarita Diet*), Danny Plotner (HBO's *Euphoria*), Ty Chen (*The Middle*), Francisco Chacin (*Poltergays*), William Lott (*Bottom*), Tiffany Shepis (*Star Trek: Picard*), and drag legend Peaches Christ (*All About Evil*). The film also features voice work from such genre veterans as Lori Cardille (George A. Romero's *Day of the Dead*), Elizabeth Coffey (John Waters' *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*) and Julia Marchese & Teri Gamble of *Horror Movie Survival Guide*.

Baur relished the chance to play an artist enduring his own dark night of the soul, especially in the unique space Varrati's film is carving out for itself. "Getting to be a part of a queer zombie film is such an exciting prospect. As an actor, I see it as a chance to contribute to a genre that hasn't explored LGBTQ+ narratives nearly enough. And, you know, in the zombie chaos, it's kinda like a big metaphor for how queer folks keep on going strong, facing whatever comes our way."

The film's cinematography and VFX are by Andrew J. Ceperley, from Netflix's *Narcos: Mexico* and the upcoming Peter Berg Netflix series *American Primeval*, while the creature effects are delivered by Cig Neutron of *Face Off*, *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula*, and *Bizarro Au Go-Go* fame. Neutron in particular jumped at the chance to bring Varrati's viscous vision to life.

"Queer horror definitely needs more representation, so I was honored to create the titular creature. I'm all about bold, outrageous films and one slimy scene in particular sold me on this project."

But will it play in Peoria? Varrati is optimistic but pragmatic and — most importantly — unbothered. "I am very upfront about the fact that this is not a traditional story, both in execution and in construction. It's not going to be for everyone… and that's okay. It's intimate and strange," Varrati enthuses. "It's queer in both the micro and macro definitions of the word."



THERE'S A ZOMBIE (DANNY PLOTNER) AND A PROTAGONIST (BEN BAUR) OUTSIDE.

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Michael Gingold's

Exordium

The Corman of New York

Depending on whether you're a subscriber or picked this issue up in the field, my set report on Larry Fessenden's *Blackout* is either the main cover story or one of the filmstrip features. And I can say, any pride of ownership aside, it's about time. It's Fessenden's first time getting full up-front placement on FANGORIA, and he fully deserves it.

Fango has, of course, long supported his cinema, from his directorial works to the many movies he's produced through his Glass Eye Pix company. I've been part of the team for enough years to witness the ascent of many noteworthy horror careers from their beginnings, and Fessenden's has been among the most consistently intriguing and exciting. I'll admit that his first genre feature, *No Telling*, slipped past us back at the time, but we were all over his 1997 vampirism drama *Habit* after catching it at an advance screening. I can still recall setting up New York-area writer Steve Puchalski to cover *Habit*, and telling him I'd have the publicist get him in touch with Fessenden. He replied that that wouldn't be necessary: "Larry hangs out at a bar I go to!"

That's Fessenden: a local guy and dyed-in-the-wool New Yorker, whose movies are imbued with that maverick, roll-up-your-sleeves-and-do-it-yourself spirit. Whether shot in the five boroughs or in the wilds further upstate, they're always rife with local color and character. *Habit* and his Frankensteinian *Depraved* are charged with big-city energy, while *No Telling*, *Wendigo* and *Blackout* revel in the small-town juxtaposition of bucolic appeal and nervous isolation.

It was this tension, among others, that grabbed me in *Wendigo*. *Habit* had made a strong impression (it was my favorite among the mini-boom of independent NYC vampire flicks in the late '90s), but Fessenden's showcase for the creature of indigenous folklore was the one that really made me sit up and take notice. I was completely caught up in the plight of its vacationing family, as father George (Jake Weber) gets on the bad side of an angry hunter and little son Miles (Erik Per Sullivan) becomes convinced the Wendigo is haunting them. Watching it elicited that wonderful sense of discovery that's one of the most exciting parts of covering the independent horror beat. Here was a filmmaker whose talent had found full flower, and I couldn't wait to see what he did next.

What he did next, it turned out, was nurture the work of numerous other East Coast auteurs via Glass Eye Pix and its fright-focused Scareflix banner. That thrill of discovery was duplicated when I caught Ti West's debut feature *The Roost* as part of a month-long series of fear features at Manhattan's late, much-lamented Two Boots Pioneer Theater in 2004. Then there was the 2010 East Coast premiere of Jim Mickle's *Stake Land* at the Woodstock Film Festival. I had already seen and very much enjoyed Mickle's previous *Mulberry Street*, but with his vampire-apocalypse follow-up, Mickle was clearly taking things to the next level. It was also fun to sense the shift in the audience's appreciation as the film went on; at first they were just enjoying seeing something shot in their own region, but at a certain point, you could tell they'd transitioned to loving it because it was a damn good movie.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LARRY FESSENDEN • BOTTOM PHOTO BY BRAXTON SOHN

That fest also hosted the East Coast premiere of Glass Eye and director Joe Maggio's culinary revenge thriller *Bitter Feast*, preceded by a gourmet dinner inspired by none other than a pre-scandal Mario Batali. During the post-screening Q&A, someone asked what the sharp-looking and atmospheric *Feast* had been shot on, and there were gasps from the audience when Maggio pointed out that he had used the same little digital camera that one of the fest staff was wielding to take pictures of the event. Getting great results with simple means has always been a hallmark of Fessenden's cinema, as both director and producer; I almost gasped myself when he told me how little *Stake Land*, which has a scope and rural-beautiful veneer suggesting Terrence Malick, cost to make.

Fessenden enjoyed a significant jump in budget to the mid-millions with *The Last Winter*, his follow-up to *Wendigo* and an extension of some of its themes. Even so, he made the movie look several times more expensive than that, which would seem to have pointed the way for him to continue on to still bigger, higher-profile projects. For a while, Fessenden was attached to a remake of the Spanish supernatural hit *The Orphanage* to be produced by Guillermo del Toro, but he wound up departing that project. Fessenden has always done things his own way, and that doesn't square with how Hollywood typically does business. Still, over the past decade, as individualistic fear fare from *Hereditary* to *Talk to Me* has proven its box-office appeal, there should have been opportunities for Fessenden to grab a bigger piece of the financial pie, and get his idiosyncratic approach out to the masses.

Instead, he just keeps on keeping on, and has ventured into other media along the way. Collaborating with filmmaker Glenn McQuaid (whose Glass Eye pic *I Sell the Dead* gave Fessenden one of the best of his many acting roles), he returned to the glorious days of yesteryear with the ongoing, always entertaining audio-horror series *Tales from Beyond the Pale*. He entered the world of video games, teaming up with his regular sound designer Graham Reznick to create the much-lauded *Until Dawn* and a couple of spinoffs. In

FESSENDEN AND THE NEXT GENERATION: WITH FILMMAKERS TI WEST AND AMY SEIMETZ.

television, he helmed "Skin and Bones," one of the creepiest episodes of the *Fear Itself* series, and the Chiller channel's *Beneath*, elevating a boilerplate teens-vs.-killer-fish script into something resonant and darkly amusing.

And in recent years, he grabbed what financing he could to get *Depraved* and *Blackout* made, demonstrating that modest funds need not impede creativity and thematic ambition. Fans like myself may wish that Fessenden would get the backing he deserves, while appreciating that he continues to get his vision out into the world by any means necessary. And his contributions to the independent fright scene as producer cannot by underestimated. In addition to the titles noted above, he has also backed West's *The House of the Devil* and *The Innkeepers*, Adrián García Bogliano's *Late Phases*, James Felix McKenney's *Satan Hates You*, Mickey Keating's *Darling* and *Psychopaths*, Ana Asensio's *Most Beautiful Island*, Jenn Wexler's *The Ranger*, and others.

Through their many disparate takes on the genre, what all these movies have in common is a distinctly personal approach, fostered by a man who has consistently expressed one of his own. He entirely warrants the sobriquet "The Roger Corman of New York," and his is a voice that will hopefully be speaking for many years to come.

FESSENDEN LEADS HIS *BLACKOUT* CREW THROUGH A NIGHTTIME SCENE.

SceneQueen

ODE TO AN INDIE LEGEND

LARRY FESSENDEN'S NEW *BLACKOUT* IS JUST THE LATEST FILM IN A LONG CAREER OF NEVER RELYING ON THE OBVIOUS.

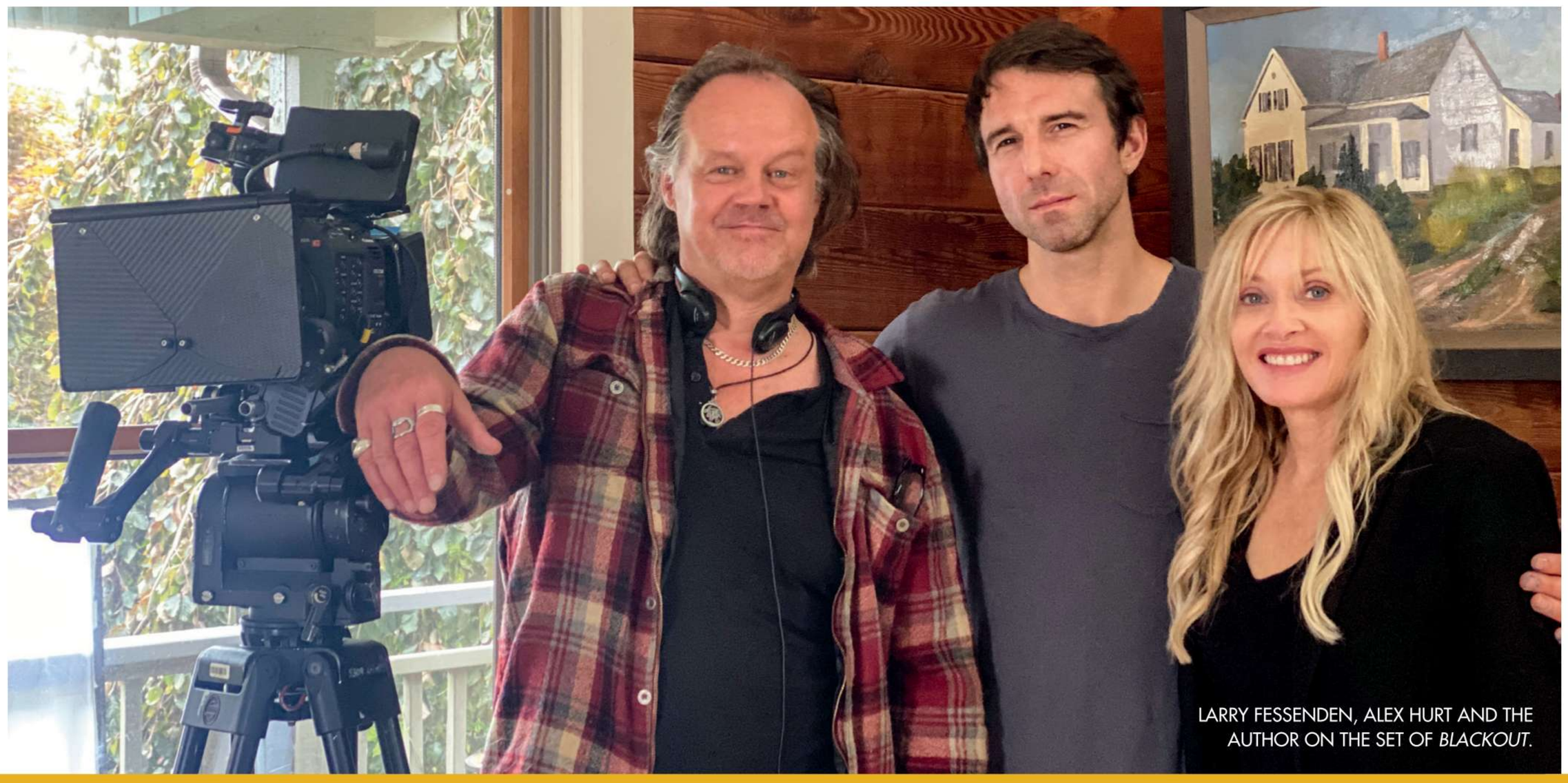
BY BARBARA CRAMPTON

Larry Fessenden is a national treasure. His films may be low-budget and homespun, but the smarts and panache they pack are blockbuster-sized, especially in the hearts and minds of indie horror fans.

Larry does it all: he's an actor, producer, writer and a director. He started very young, like a lot of filmmakers do, writing and directing his own projects with whatever cash he had lying around. Larry didn't worry about who would buy his films or who would watch them. He made what he loved and he made films his way. After a few years of never compromising on his vision and passion, his fanbase grew. He was able to bring in financiers and became successful in turning a profit.

Not a fan of shock for its own sake, Larry's movies do have scares and gore but also something to say about human nature. Many times his mostly flawed characters recognize their own shortcomings while always striving to be better people. I think the same can be said of the man himself. I have a theory that every main character in his films is Larry.

I spent a lot of time with Larry while we were making the 2021 film *Jakob's Wife*. We shared intimate musings about our marriages and our own part within them. We talked about the environment and politics, our fears and beliefs, and I got to know him well. I think our openness with each other helped our chemistry within the film. Our on-screen relationship is something that I'm very proud of, and I'm prouder still to call Larry a collaborator and a dear friend. With all the pain and angst he puts his characters through,



LARRY FESSENDEN, ALEX HURT AND THE AUTHOR ON THE SET OF *BLACKOUT*.

PHOTO (THIS PAGE) COURTESY OF BARBARA CRAMPTON • PHOTO (FACING PAGE) COURTESY OF JIM MICKLE

his empathy and generosity for others is always evident. Whether he's supporting a young director or working as a scene partner, there is no one more genuine, caring or passionate about honoring the craft of the creator than Larry Fessenden.

He began his early life wanting to be an actor. But it wasn't until 1979, when he was sixteen and his parents gave him a Super 8 camera, that he realized that the placement of the camera is how you tell a story. That fascinated him. He then set his sights on becoming a director. One of his first movies, 1991's *No Telling*, garnered early "maverick" status for him as a daring filmmaker. This standing continued with films like *Wendigo* and *Habit*, as Fessenden unflinchingly explored the inner workings of man and nature, and the pain and cruelty that often reside in both.

His latest, *Blackout*, completes his career-long trilogy of monster movies. Add *Habit*, his vampire tale, and *Depraved*, his Frankenstein story, to this werewolf yarn of woeful regrets, and we have a trio reflecting his modern sensibilities on classic monster tropes.

Filmmakers who begin with small, provocative works often hope to move on to bigger commercial fare, movies that carry a greater financial reward and wider audience. Larry has been flirted with by major horror producers and studios many times and recently had a career retrospective at the prestigious Museum of Modern Art in NYC.

He has been feted and honored and written about lovingly for over 35 years. But Larry has a truly independent spirit and mind.

It's hard not to be in awe of someone as pure as Larry, a true creative and an ally to so many other filmmakers. He's been a part of over 350 projects in various capacities and has helped the careers of many great directors working today, including Jenn Wexler, Jim Mickle and Ti West.

Like Larry, West has recently completed his own trilogy of terror, soon adding *MaXXXine* to *Pearl* and *X*. Ti credits Larry for the launch of his career: "After only seeing two of my student films he produced and financed my first two features and always encouraged my vision as a director. His consistent enthusiasm and investment in independent film make him one of the most influential producers in indie cinema."

Jim Mickle (*Cold in July* and *We Are What We Are*) worked with Larry in his early career. Jim was impressed with *Habit* when he saw it in film school. Mickle actually hired Fessenden on the first film he made, *Mulberry Street*, as an actor. Jim then asked Larry to produce *Stake Land* and says that, "Larry knows how to build an environment around the filmmaking process that gets the best out of everyone while always nurturing and protecting the craft of movie-making. I remember asking for a lot of equipment on *Stake Land* and instead of just saying no, he took me out for beers and talked about embracing your own voice and instincts even if you don't have all the bells and whistles. Larry knows how to speak your language and challenges you to do your best."

FESSENDEN AND DIRECTOR JIM MICKLE (*STAKE LAND*) IN 2007.

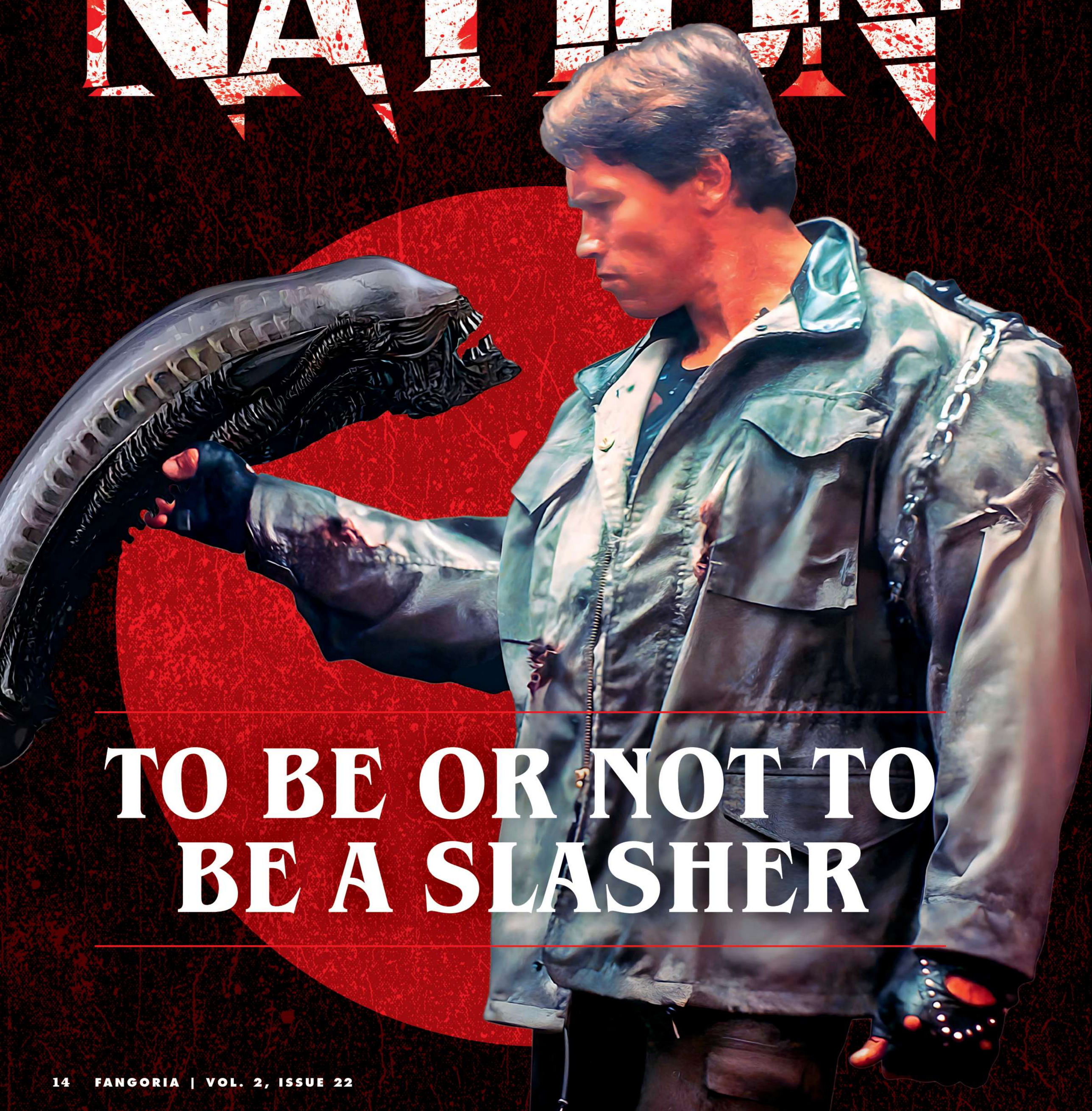
One of Larry's longest-tenured collaborators is Jenn Wexler, who worked with Larry on the producing side for many years before going out on her own as a director with *The Ranger* and *The Sacrifice Game* (on page 34!). She credits his company Glass Eye Pix for showing her the ropes and then giving her the reins as a producer. "Glass Eye was a place where you were encouraged to go out of your comfort zone and try. Fail or succeed, Larry provided a safety net to learn, grow and excel. And while we were learning, we were watching a true artist at work, someone who cares deeply about his craft."

It used to be that it was easier to learn and grow with each movie a young filmmaker made, but somehow the world has become less forgiving and the industry has gotten so competitive. It's harder to learn and grow and keep getting opportunities if your first movie isn't a huge success out of the gate. That's unfortunate, but Larry will always create the open space for newcomers to learn and become better storytellers, while being one of the very best himself.

Long live our king of independent scary stories, Larry Fessenden! 💀

Stephen Graham Jones'

SLASHER NATION



TO BE OR NOT TO BE A SLASHER

Is *Alien* a slasher? Is *The Terminator*? Our expert investigates.

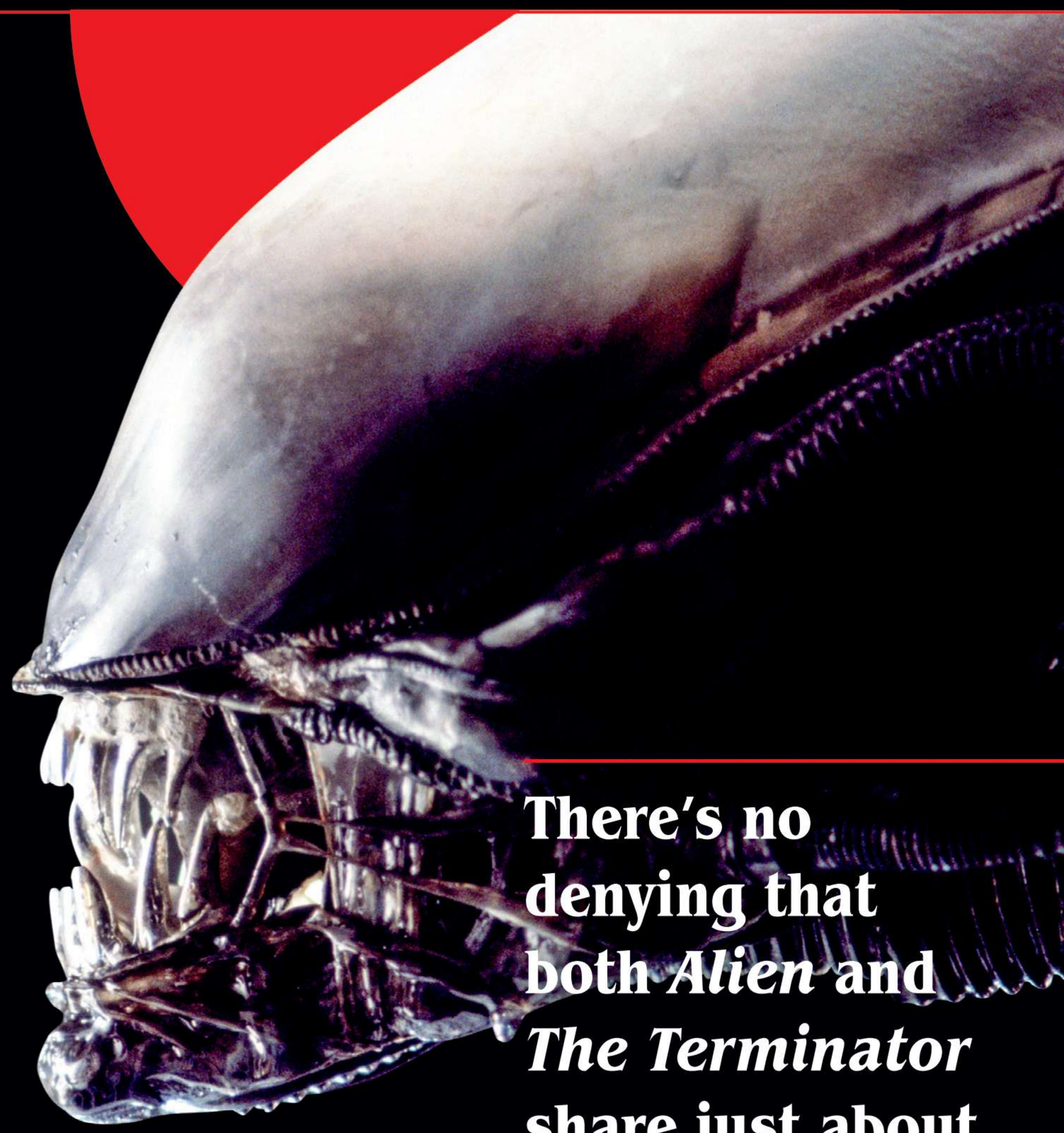
What do we do with those beloved films that have so many slasher characteristics, yet are still sort of straddling the line? While it probably doesn't do the genre any good to stand up a You Must Be This Tall to Enter sign – the more the merrier, I say, until the world's a hockey mask staring out into the void of space – we can still scry into the intricate mechanics of the slasher a little better by figuring out just how many Jasons we can get to loom on the head of this machete. So long as we don't forget that these arguments are, finally, a form of adoration.

And what horror films do we adore more than *Alien* and *The Terminator*?

This isn't about the science fiction elements central to both, either. That's not even a bump in the road for the slasher.

What it is about, though, is the Reveal – that moment in the narrative when the slasher gives a big villain monologue about why they've been doing this the whole time. Pamela Voorhees in the original *Friday the 13th*, for prime example: she lays all her motivations out like she's on the stand, and it's a big upset, a surprise, a… Reveal. When done right, the Reveal makes us recontextualize everything we thought we knew about why all these killings have been happening. When Billy Loomis in *Scream* tells Sidney this is all because of her mom – wow.

THE T-800 AND THE XENOMORPH: CLOSER TO JASON VOORHEES THAN YOU MIGHT THINK.



There's no denying that both *Alien* and *The Terminator* share just about everything else with the slasher.

So, what of the Reveals in *Alien* and *The Terminator*?

First, though, yes, "yes" over and over, both of these films ring all the slasher bells as they go round and round this violent carousel. There's set-piece kills, plenty of menace and stalking, there's a final girl finally overcoming, there's third-reel bodydumps – there's even slashercam for the one of these killers who has eyes.

And, importantly, both stories have really surprising Reveals.

In *Alien*, going by the usual dictum that the Unmasking and the Reveal are the same moment – they usually are, it makes sense – it's easy to knee-jerk up an identification: the Reveal is when this xenomorph is seen in all its glory, head to tail. It's definitely a good nightmare image, and pays off those hurried glimpses we've been catching. However, it doesn't really tell us anything about this mad-dog killer's motivations or reasons. It just gives us the alien's shape, its size, its unsettling Gigerness. That pharyngeal jaw doesn't extend to explain how this xenomorph has been doing all this violence to the crew of the Nostromo because *another* crew of space truckers let the xenomorph's dear little facehugger die in Crystal Lake.

And you all guessed the real Reveal in *Alien* anyway, right?

"Crew Expendable."

That's why these bodies are stacking up: corporate greed. Which the xenomorph doesn't know about even in the dimmest sense. It's just a biting machine, trying to move forward into the future, where it can bite some more.

So, the Reveal in *Alien*, while it does make us recontextualize what we thought we knew, and re-align our sympathies and loyalties and resentments, it doesn't really have anything to do with the killer. This random xenomorph could just as well be a flu making the rounds, and Weyland-Yutani, in their evil way, really wants to see the effects of the rhinovirus in space.

The Terminator, then. Sarah Connor is most definitely a final girl, even on par with Ellen Ripley, and the T-100 is practically Pamela Voorhees's grown-up son: unstoppable, no emotion, a literal killing machine – one you also can't ever hope to negotiate with, except with violence. The T-800 101 model has that single-mindedness we know and love from our slashers, and it can take damage upon damage, just keep on coming.

The T-800 is a thing of beauty, no doubt.

(THIS PAGE AND FACING): SARAH CONNOR (LINDA HAMILTON) IS THE FINAL GIRL TO THE TERMINATOR (OR TWO); ELLEN RIPLEY (SIGOURNEY WEAVER) TO AN ENTIRE SPECIES.

But, what's the Reveal in *The Terminator*?

It's easy to say it's at the mirror, when it's tending to its facial wounds and we see some of that hyper-alloy combat chassis/endoskeleton – that's definitely an Unmasking – but, really, that's just confirming what *The Terminator*'s already told us.

The Reveal isn't when all that Model 101 skin is stripped off, either, though that's pretty amazing and Harryhausen. No, the Reveal in *The Terminator* is that Reese, this soldier sent back in time to save Sarah Connor so she can give birth to the person who saves the future, John Connor, *is* John Connor's dad. And this T-800, Reese explains, has been sent back to stop John Connor from ever happening.

Doesn't get much cooler than that.

However, just because we couldn't guess the T-800's origin, or that it's coming back to its own prehistory to commit a timecrime, pulling the curtain back to "reveal" that doesn't establish motivation. That's just letting us in on its *mission*. Like the xenomorph, the T-800 isn't where the "evil" is located. Where the evil's located is in the calculating strategy of that great artificial intelligence in the future.

Yes, this Reveal is just as wonderful and dark as the Reveal in *Alien*, but the question we have to ask is one of ownership: whose Reveal is it? In *Alien*, it's Weyland-Yutani's, and, by extension, Ash's. In *The Terminator*, it's Reese's: after it, we know so much more about him, and his motivations.

There's no denying that both *Alien* and *The Terminator* share just about everything else with the slasher, though. But it finally doesn't come down to conventions or surface characteristics. Still, if it walks like a slasher and it

talks like a slasher, then why not let it into the club? Why be so strict with membership?

Because – and this is just me, way out on a ledge – because the Reveal in the slasher needs to tell us more about the one with the machete, such that the "evil" is located in *them*, meaning that, when the final girl puts this killer down, she's defeating the evil itself, not its proxy.

For the slasher to work, I feel that's vital – the malignancy has to be right there, deflatable. Otherwise, this final girl's victory is hollow, and this is just the first installment, because there's a whole crusade coming, maybe even a righteous rebellion.

And, of course, feel free to rebel yourself. Build a slasher with a Reveal contrary to how the Reveal usually works – just, like the poets say: you can't write free verse until you know form (doing an anti-sonnet suggests intimacy with the sonnet...). It's the same with the slasher: deviate all you want, so long as you know what you're deviating *from*.

Don't worry about hurting the slasher, either. The slasher can survive most onslaughts and still be there in the sequel, Mr. Ghostface. And, it could be that your innovation is what levels it up to its next stage, right? Don't worry about the wreckage you leave behind, either. Well, except insofar as what you leave behind, as we all know, can stand up again, its eyes burning behind that mask, its hand wrapped tight around a machete... 💀

This isn't about the science fiction elements central to both. That's not even a bump in the road for the slasher.

AS WE WRAP ANOTHER YEAR WITH NO SHORTAGE OF GORY GRATIFICATION, LET'S TOAST THOSE HORROR CREATORS AND EFFECTS CRAFTERS WHO ENGAGE IN THE GRANDEST SPECTACLE OF ON-SCREEN KILLS. IT'S BEEN ANOTHER BANNER YEAR FOR ICONIC HORROR FRANCHISES FURTHERING THEIR LEGACIES, BUT DON'T COUNT OUT SOME BLOODTHIRSTY INDIE UNDERDOGS. CORNFIELD BEHEADINGS, ELEVATOR THROAT PUNCHES, A PERFORMER WHO INDEED BREAKS HER LEGS, THE WORKS. THEY ALL DESERVE THEIR SPECIAL HIGHLIGHT HERE IN THE PAGES OF FANGORIA.

KILLING IT

2023's BEST DEATHS IN HORROR

BY MATT DONATO

10 HOLY SMOKES!

Chris McKay's *Renfield* is a rare modern balance of digital and practical effects, with one of my favorites coming early in Dracula's killing spree. A vampire hunter priest (*Fright Night*'s William Ragsdale!) thinks he's confined Drac, but Renfield breaks his containment circle. Drac then turns into smoky particles and enters the priest's body, triggering an explosion that rivals Devon Sawa's similarly memorable death in *Chucky* last season. It's like a detonated bomb, sending blessed chunks of padre in all directions, with an impressive blast radius that's colored squeamishly crimson.

PROJECT WOLF HUNTING PHOTOS COURTESY OF SCREAMBOX • *RENFIELD* PHOTOS COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES • *ELEVATOR GAME* & *THE PUPPETMAN* PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHUDDER

9 SORRY, SOMETHING'S IN MY THROAT.

Kudos to *Elevator Game* because this kill is unexpected and... punchy. In Rebekah McKendry's film, a YouTube channel's business manager (Liam Stewart-Kanigan) partakes in an urban legend and dies horribly. He rides an elevator in search of another realm, but instead finds the demon that awaits poor souls who dare enter the heretic floor sequence. The slick-haired manager is talking to his colleague when the "Fifth Floor Woman" thrusts her fist through his throat from behind, trying to grab the other elevator rider. Ms. Fifth Floor then yanks her hand out of the gaping hole in his esophagus after spraying blood everywhere for a nifty jolt of energy and a proper jump scare.

8 CELEBS DON'T GET SPECIAL TREATMENT.

What happens when Kim Hong Sun's South Korean *Con Air* riff *Project Wolf Hunting* meets *Resident Evil* influences? International singer-songwriter Seo In-Guk gets pulverized by a genetic freakshow. In-Guk's tatted inmate meets a Nemesis-like destroyer (Choi Gwi-hwa) who eviscerates the film's to-that-point main villain. *Project Wolf Hunting* doesn't hold back on gunky juices, flowing like fake blood is "buy one ounce, get seven free," as In-Guk takes the beating of a lifetime then heads into the afterlife without a head on his shoulders.

7 NAZI PUNKS, FUCK OFF.

Who doesn't love to see modern-day Nazis get their heads blown up by a teenage girl? Matt Angel and Suzanne Coote's *The Wrath of Becky* gets off to an explosive start with a simple execution. A loud-mouthed, Proud Boy-like asshat (Michael Sirow) has a hand grenade taped inside his mouth with a string attached to a front door's knocker. Luckily for us, but unluckily for the scumbag, the home's owner is unaware of the trap until it's too late. Seann William Scott watches as his buddy's noggin kabooms into a billion bloody chunks, then his corpse hits the lawn with a thud, red juices squirting out of his chewed-up neck stump like a sprinkler.

6 DO YOU EVEN LIVE, BRO?

You can add Brandon Christensen's *The Puppetman* to the list of movies featuring primo gym deaths like *Death Spa* or *Final Destination 3*. A college athlete (Cameron Wong) is getting his pump on when an evil spirit possesses his body while he's still conscious. First, the "Puppetman" makes him stack way too many weight plates on his bench bar, then press the mass and hold the bar above his head while his arms quiver, struggling to prevent it all from plummeting down. He's straining so hard his teeth chip and blood vessels pop in one eye until he hits his failure point, and the bar slams into his screaming mouth, severing the top half of his head at his dimple creases.

THE WRATH OF BECKY PHOTOS COURTESY OF QUIVER DISTRIBUTION

5 PINOCCHI-OH-NO!

Thanksgiving is a smorgasbord of scrumptious kills, but my favorite in Eli Roth's holiday horror crashes Plymouth's Turkey Day parade. Atop one float is a Mayflower-lookin' boat with a wooden pillar sticking out the front. The vehicle's driver slams on the brakes causing the attached boat to lurch forward, smashing the pillar straight through his cab's back windshield and into his head, *Final Destination 2* style. What's better is the long hold on the river of blood gushing from the man's face hole and down his newly sanded nose, like a rod rammed through a rotten watermelon. Bonus points for the horrified faces of the driver's children riding shotgun as daddy's corpse sprays them with sanguine liquids.

4 TOO TIGHT!

I'd imagine death by hanging is an excruciating way to go, but *Malum* doesn't stop at suffocation. In the cult horror by Anthony DiBlasi, a dangling damsel (Valerie Loo) kicks her legs while stuck in a noose, and a police officer watches the situation escalate. The rope tightens, first chopping off a few fingers trying to prevent more pressure. Tighter it binds, collapsing the woman's throat and popping one of her eyeballs out like a stress toy. Tighter still the rope constricts until the victim's head disconnects and her body falls to the ground, dousing the onlooking officer in a comical amount of blood.

3 WHERE IS YOUR TKNOGD NOW?

There's plenty of ickiness in *V/H/S/85*, but the highest-of-lights is from Natasha Kermani's retro cyberpunk segment "TKNOGD." A technology opposer (Chivonne Michelle) puts on a one-woman show where she enters a virtual world and challenges a digital deity, paying dearly for her hubris. A live audience watches the women first get tossed around on stage like a child in a gorilla's playpen. Her leg is broken into a painful angle by the hardwired entity, then skinned from the knee down, leaving only muscle and tissue. As a final blow, the "Techno God" rips her other leg clean off and blood spills onto the stage, the audience still unaware that the brutality is not part of the show.

2 THIS IS GOING TO SUCK.

Credit Italian surgeon Leonardo Gigli for the most viscerally disgusting death trap in Kevin Greutert's *Saw X*. Valentina (Paulette Hernandez) must slice through her thigh with Gigli's old-century wire cutting device, frantically pulling back and forth to the unsettling tune of squelchy mutilation. Then she has to stick a pointed suction tool into her exposed bone to extract enough mucusy-gross marrow, which she does not accomplish. After Valentina's timer runs out, another wire saw rig engages and decapitates the squealing scam artist, sending her decapitated head and limp body crashing to the warehouse floor, next to the leg she already dismembered herself.

1 WHO CAN KILL A CHILD?

In David Slade's 1960s-set Halloween creature flick *Dark Harvest*, children go to war against the pumpkin-spiced monster Sawtooth Jack while adults stay locked inside. That's what makes the gore hit harder – adolescent boys are being torn to pieces in the name of sacrificial tradition. No one gets it worse than greaser wannabe Mitch (West Mulholland), whose forehead collides with a swinging axe at full sprint. Slade's penchant for gruesome visuals holds the camera on Mitch as he loses everything above his eyes, his noggin cracked open like half a jack-o-lantern with nothing but chunky, pulpy guts left behind. He utters his friend's name as blood cascades down his face, now a ghastly mess with an exposed and halved brain.

MALUM PHOTOS COURTESY WELCOME VILLAIN • *THANKSGIVING* PHOTO BY ADRIEN MOROT • *V/H/S/85* PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHUDDER • *SAW X* PHOTOS BY ALEXANDRO BOLAÑOS ESCAMILLA COURTESY OF LIONSGATE • *DARK HARVEST* PHOTOS COURTESY OF MGM

SLASHING THROUGH THE SNOW

On set with IT'S A Wonderful KNIFE

By Angel Melanson

The filmmakers behind modern slasher successes Freaky and Tragedy Girls team up to stuff our stockings with horror.

HARK! THE HERALD ANGEL SWINGS (A KNIFE).

***Editor's note: This article contains spoilers for* It's A Wonderful Knife.**

Outside of Vancouver, Canada, snow is being shoveled from the driveway of an elegant mansion. Everything here is idyllic, sparkling, as cozy as you might expect from a typical Hallmark holiday movie – except for the container labeled "Angel Knife" resting on a nearby prop cart. This is Angel Falls, the setting of director Tyler MacIntyre and writer Michael Kennedy's holiday horror, *It's A Wonderful Knife*.

Kennedy always wanted to write a Christmas slasher, and after his 2020 hit *Freaky* and the upcoming *Time Cut*, he's reaching the culmination of his genre mashup trio: "I knew I wanted to do a riff because *Freaky* was a play on *Freaky Friday*, and *Time Cut* is a play on *Back to the Future*. I thought to myself, 'I might as well do the third one so people can really think I have no idea how to do anything else but these genre mashups,'" he jokes. "Give them the fodder so they can make fun of me online."

In fact, everyone on this team is embracing the mashup status. Star Joel McHale says, "*It's A Wonderful Knife*: it's a Christmas movie, it's clearly going to have some sort of slasher quality, and there's a joke there. It's a hat trick."

Yes, this is indeed a play on *It's A Wonderful Life*, Frank Capra's 1946 holiday classic starring Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey, a man who thinks the world would be better off if he'd never been born. Thanks to his guardian angel, Clarence, he learns just how wrong he was. He's whisked to an alternate version of Bedford Falls, a place where George Bailey never existed, and it's a sad shell of the town he loves.

In *It's A Wonderful Knife*, Jane Widdop's Winnie Carruthers lands in an alternate reality after saving her town from a knife-wielding psychopath. Winnie's father David (McHale) works for Angel Falls' big-shot real estate tycoon Henry Waters (Justin Long), and as they're trying to buy up all the town's property to make way for a shopping mall, a serial killer disguised like an angelic tree-topper is slashing anyone who gets in the way of "progress."

This reality goes awry when Winnie and her best friend Cara (Hana Huggins) head to a Christmas party where the angel makes an appearance, brutally murdering Cara, followed by an attack on Winnie's brother, Jimmy (Aiden Howard). Winnie manages to electrocute the killer, revealing a barbecued Henry Waters beneath the angel mask. Though her brother survives the attack, the loss of her best friend and the trauma of killing Waters turns Winnie's life upside down. When we

> **"When I was thinking of iconic imagery from Christmas, I thought of the angel killer, a killer wearing an angelic costume that... could hide in plain sight."**
> **- Michael Kennedy**

WATCH OUT, MOM! JUDY CARRUTHERS (ERIN BOYES) GETS THE SERAPHIM SPECIAL.

PHOTO (BOTTOM) COURTESY OF WONDERFUL KNIFE, LLC • PHOTO (FACING) BY ANGEL LYNNE

catch up to her a year later, things are looking dire. She fervently wishes that she hadn't been born, then wakes up in an Angel Falls that never knew her.

Unlike the film that inspired Kennedy's script, here we spend much more time playing in that other universe. "I realized as I was crafting the story, George Bailey is only in his alternate reality for fifteen minutes," Kennedy says. "This was an opportunity to do something that movie did and make it a bigger part of the story."

Of course, this new Angel Falls is anything but angelic. It's where the killer angel's carnage has continued unchecked without Winnie to stop it, her brother died without her there to save him, and fear has changed the landscape of the town and all its residents. Winnie seeks out the help of local "weird girl" Bernie (Jess McLeod), who has no memory of Winnie's existence, but is at least willing to listen – and to help her stop the angel of Angel Falls for good.

The Christmas slasher sub-genre tends to invoke images of killer Santas, but you won't find any in Angel Falls. Kennedy explains, "We've been there, done that. When I was thinking of iconic imagery from Christmas, I thought of the angel killer, a killer wearing an angelic costume that is also creepy." The aesthetic was also an important selling point for Kennedy: "I thought it would be really cool for the killer to wear white on white. A white outfit on the white snow, I thought that would be creepy and interesting. They could kind of hide in plain sight in a way that a Santa Claus killer couldn't."

Kennedy's script describes a killer dressed head to toe in white with a white mask, but figuring out exactly what that would look like was another endeavor. MacIntyre elaborates: "Creating the angel was a bit of a process. We started pulling references, and I particularly looked at a lot of vintage angel tree toppers, the type that you'd see on the top of a Christmas tree in the '50s. A lot of those have these kind of porcelain faces with a shiny quality to them, and some of them were

PHOTO (TOP) BY ALICE XANDRA THIRTEEN • PHOTO (BOTTOM) BY ANGEL LYNNE

PHOTO BY ALICE XANDRA THIRTEEN

just blank white, featureless." He credits production designer Tiana P. Gordon and costume designer Matea Pasaric with bringing the final look to life.

One of the first shots of the day is a quick insert of Joel McHale in the killer angel costume as his lifeless body is unmasked. Yes, that's just one of the surprises awaiting Winnie in her new reality: here, the killer (well, one of them) is revealed to be her father, David. They shoot the scene a few times as McHale holds his breath and stares up, dead-eyed, into nothing. It's an eerie effect, the featureless mask being peeled away to reveal McHale's face frozen into a death mask underneath.

Winnie's discovery required an emotional performance in a day filled with heavy scenes. Widdop gives kudos to co-star McHale: "It's amazing when you have such a strong scene partner to be able to play off of. It just makes your job so much easier. That is the magic." Plus, "I love being able to cry at work. What other job lets you cry at work and have that cathartic outlet?"

The next scene is set: a gorgeous home decorated for Christmas, fire crackling. This is Long's first day on set, and his appearance is jarring. The usual brunette is now blonde and very tan. His brown eyes are blue, and he's got veneers that give him a predatory, shark-like quality. Long's look is inspired by tycoons and televangelists, and it's unsettling, to say the least.

"It kind of came out of the discussions that we had about trying to make this sort of smarmy businessman character, that has parts of Michael Douglas from *Wall Street* and parts of Joel Osteen," MacIntyre says. "But at the same time, we had this idea that he has a bit of the DNA of a Hallmark villain."

In the scene, Waters and Carruthers try to convince Roger Evans (William B. Davis, *The X-Files*' Cigarette Smoking Man) to give up the family estate. MacIntyre describes all the different dynamics at play: "Justin Long, who's a bit of a wild card. Joel McHale, who's usually a wild card, but when you put him beside Justin, he's a very grounding presence. William B. Davis, who's essentially coming out of retirement to do this in his eighties. And then you have Hana Huggins, who has literally just turned nineteen. It's her first day on set for a feature film ever, and they're all in the same scene."

Through numerous takes, Long improvises and plays with the delivery. "Justin would follow these impulses, which is good because it would lead to some comedic stuff, it would lead to some fresh stuff, it would lead to weird stuff," says MacIntyre. "But he's also a very experienced performer; it's not his first rodeo. So he tends to try to expand things in a way that you could chop it out if you need to."

"It's A Wonderful Knife: *it's a Christmas movie, it's clearly going to have some sort of slasher quality, and there's a joke there. It's a hat trick."* - Joel McHale

VETERAN ACTOR WILLIAM B. DAVIS IS NOT BEING TREATED WITH THE RESPECT HE DESERVES.

PHOTO (TOP) BY NICHOLAS PIATNIK • PHOTO (BOTTOM) BY ALICE XANDRA THIRTEEN

The side of the sprawling estate doubles as a park where we see the beginning of the film's alternate universe unfold. It's a pivotal scene that lets us know we're not in Kansas anymore. Widdop's Winnie runs into Waters, who is not only very much alive but also happens to be the town's mayor – and he has no idea who Winnie is. "I didn't know about the bronze and the blue contacts," Widdop says of Long's look. "I knew about the wig and the veneers, but obviously, I hadn't seen it. It was less unsettling when I first met him because he didn't have that voice that he was using. But as soon as we first did the scene, I was freaked out."

We're getting close to Davis' big death scene. It's McHale's most anticipated of the shoot: "*X-Files* fans will go crazy." In the scene, Evans opens his front door to find a snowman on his front porch. The snowman explodes, and the angel bursts through the detonating decoy, ready to tackle Evans and slit his throat. (We do love a dramatic entrance.) This is the shoot's first stunt and FX day. Fango picked a hell of a time to drop in!

To achieve the effect, a bust of the snowman is rigged with explosives, and when MacIntyre gives the cue, it will be blown to smithereens right there in the doorway. The snowman's carrot nose and coal eyes have no idea what's about to happen, and I almost feel a little bad for him. The camera is tight on the snowman's face, and everyone takes cover. MacIntyre calls action, the door swings open, and BAM, the hard-packed ice and snow are torn apart, flying in every direction. The gag goes off without a hitch.

Davis is brought in to replace his stuntman, and he lies on stunt pads with a hose rigged through his festive sweater, ready to spurt blood when the angel slices Evans' throat. As MacIntyre calls cut, Davis is helped to his feet, covered in blood, and the crew applauds. That's a picture wrap on William B. Davis, and a successful first FX gag for this breakneck-paced, eighteen-day shoot.

It's probably time to talk about that sweet custom knife, huh? After all, an angel's nothing without his wings. *It's A Wonderful Knife*'s angel is robed but not winged, because of the impracticality of movement wings would create. But production designer Gordon figured a way around the problem. "Tiana designed the knife, which is truly wonderful," MacIntyre says. "Essentially she found a way to get the wings in there by putting them on the hilt of the knife. She did this preliminary drawing during a meeting, and that's pretty much how the knife turned out. If we're going to make a movie called *It's A Wonderful Knife*, we knew we needed to put some time into that."

As important as weapons and kills are in a story like this one, the relationship between Winnie and Bernie becomes the true heart of the film. Widdop says the scene where

AWW, HE LOOKS SO PEACEFUL. MINUS THE BLOOD AND THE HORRIFYINGLY BLANK MASK, THAT IS.

alternate-reality Waters dies is her favorite for that reason. “It's really the defining moment where I realize I'm here because of Bernie. I’m here to save Bernie, because she was going to kill herself. I just think that that's such a beautiful moment when Bernie stands up for herself and finally has a friend who can help her do that. It's hard to make a killing beautiful. But it is.”

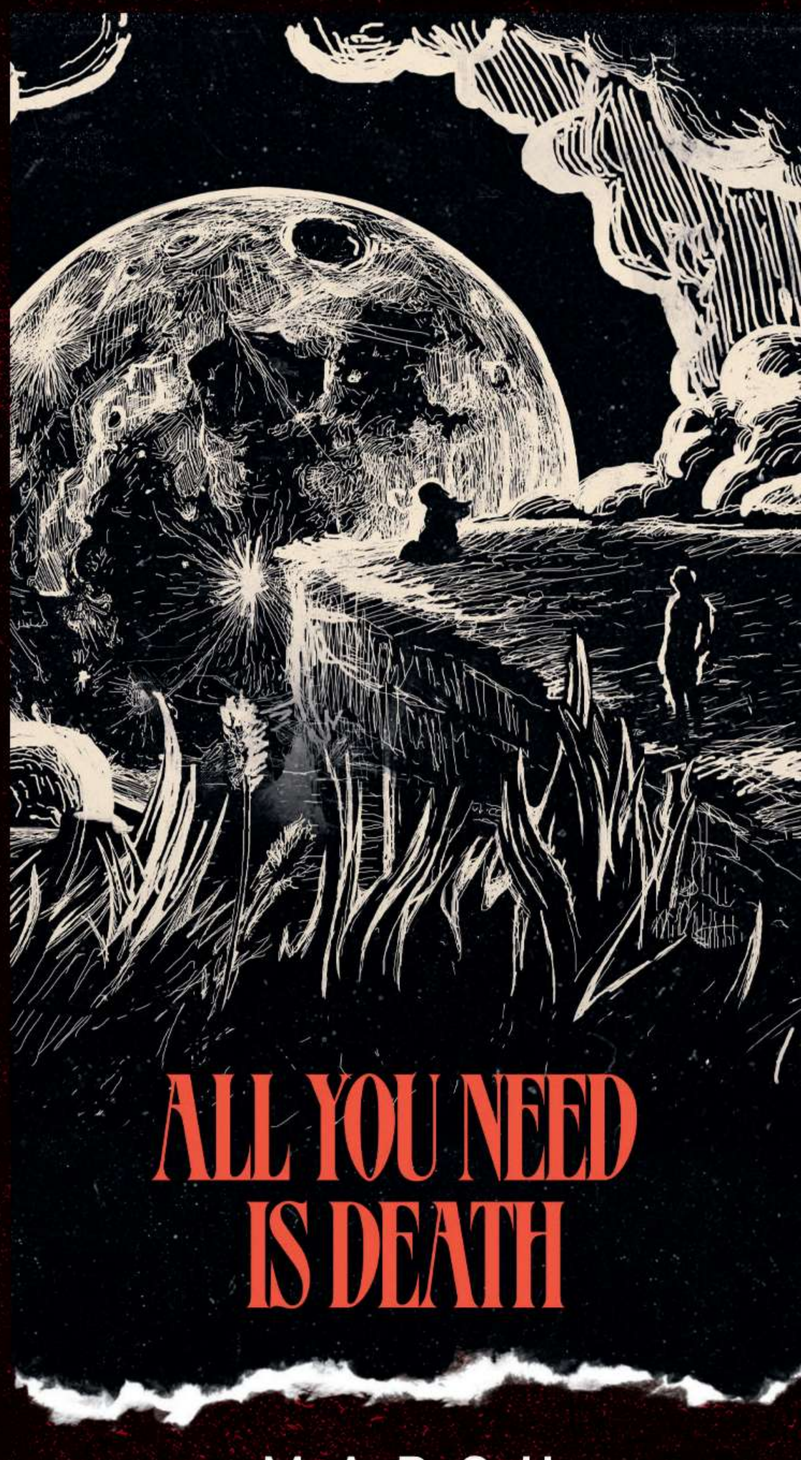
MacIntyre echoes Widdop’s appreciation for the way Kennedy’s script finds beauty in the brutality: “We have a similar interest in terms of we don't take our horror movies too seriously, but have a lot of respect for them and the craft and are big fans at heart. What I really responded to was the sincerity in the script. It definitely has more heart than a lot of the stuff that I've been allowed to direct so far and a lot of the stuff I write myself. Primarily, when I am looking for a script to direct, I want it to be something that I wouldn't write.”

He continues, “I really hope that people pick up some of the elements of loneliness that come around the holidays. It can be a very polarizing time because you're surrounding yourself with friends and family often, but not if you don't have those connections or you don't have a stable family life. I think that subset of people is really represented by Bernie in our story.”

Above all, *It’s A Wonderful Knife* is a celebration of misfits. And in keeping with the tradition of *It’s A Wonderful Life*, the film tells us that every individual matters, and each life has a ripple effect that touches others. It’s a nice reminder to have around the holidays – especially when you drive the point home with a gilded knife and a whole lot of blood splatter.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WONDERFUL KNIFE, LLC

DIRECTOR TYLER MACINTYRE DESCRIBED JUSTIN LONG’S CHARACTER LOOK AS “PARTS OF MICHAEL DOUGLAS FROM *WALL STREET* AND PARTS OF JOEL OSTEEN.” TRULY SPOOKY!



BLACK OUT

Larry Fessenden cuts loose in his thematically loaded werewolf yarn.

By Michael Gingold

It's a long and winding road that leads to Andes, the tiny upstate New York town nestled at the western edge of the Catskill Mountains, where writer/director Larry Fessenden is filming his new movie *Blackout*. On this early-October afternoon, FANGORIA pulls into the parking lot of a school building that's serving as the day and night's location, and the sight of a police car emblazoned with the name "Talbot Falls" makes it clear we're in the right place. It's a reference to Larry Talbot, protagonist of the 1941 classic *The Wolf Man*, and *Blackout* (which Dark Sky Films releases in early 2024) is the lycanthropic closer to Fessenden's trilogy of homages to classic creatures.

That triptych began with *Habit*, the 1997 film also starring Fessenden and metaphorically equating alcoholism and vampirism. In 2019, he delivered his own variation on the Frankenstein theme with *Depraved* — and the year before that, *Blackout* had its first incarnation as an entry in Fessenden and Glenn McQuaid's audio-horror-drama series *Tales from Beyond the Pale*. "That had the essence of the story — two of the main events that occur in the movie," Fessenden says during a break in shooting. "One is a werewolf transforming while he's driving a car, and he goes off the road into a ditch and mayhem ensues, and the other is..." But we'll hold off on revealing that one, as it's a key, latecoming story development.

"The movie is about a painter named Charley [Alex Hurt] who wakes up thinking he may have done terrible things," Fessenden continues. "He can't remember, and that's part of the angst that he goes through, because people are getting slaughtered in this small town, and he's sure that it's him. I expanded the story to be a portrait of an upstate New York town dealing with some of the problems afflicting our society: the distrust and the misinformation. So it's my usual themes all together in a werewolf story."

In the scene currently being shot outside the building, which has been done up as a police station, that paranoia is beginning to boil over, and a riled-up group of townspeople has gathered. They believe Latino laborer Miguel (Rigo Garay) is responsible for the carnage, and Pastor Francis (Fessenden regular John Speredakos) is attempting to calm their frayed nerves. As the crowd gets ready for a take, actor Joseph Castillo-Midyett, playing Talbot Falls Police officer Luis, gets them in the spirit by singing a few lyrics from *Beauty and the Beast*'s "The Mob Song." Fessenden calls "Action," and Speredakos entreats the group, "I've known most of you since you were in short pants. I knew most of your parents. They tried to teach you to be good, caring citizens. That is what God expects from us!"

"I'm sort of the voice of spiritual reason of the film," Speredakos says once this scene has wrapped. "When the townspeople are attempting to railroad Miguel and

CHARLEY (ALEX HURT) WOLFS OUT, WHICH IS BAD NEWS FOR A LOCAL GAL (ASTA PAREDES, OPPOSITE PAGE).

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GLASS EYE PIX • TOP LEFT BY NELSON BAKERMAN

pin the murders on him, simply because he's the outsider — one of 'them' — I'm desperately trying to get them to have some perspective here. The key line in the script is, 'A house divided will not stand.' I'm trying to get them to understand that, and to recognize that this way lies madness, and we have to stick together. But everyone is polarized by this point."

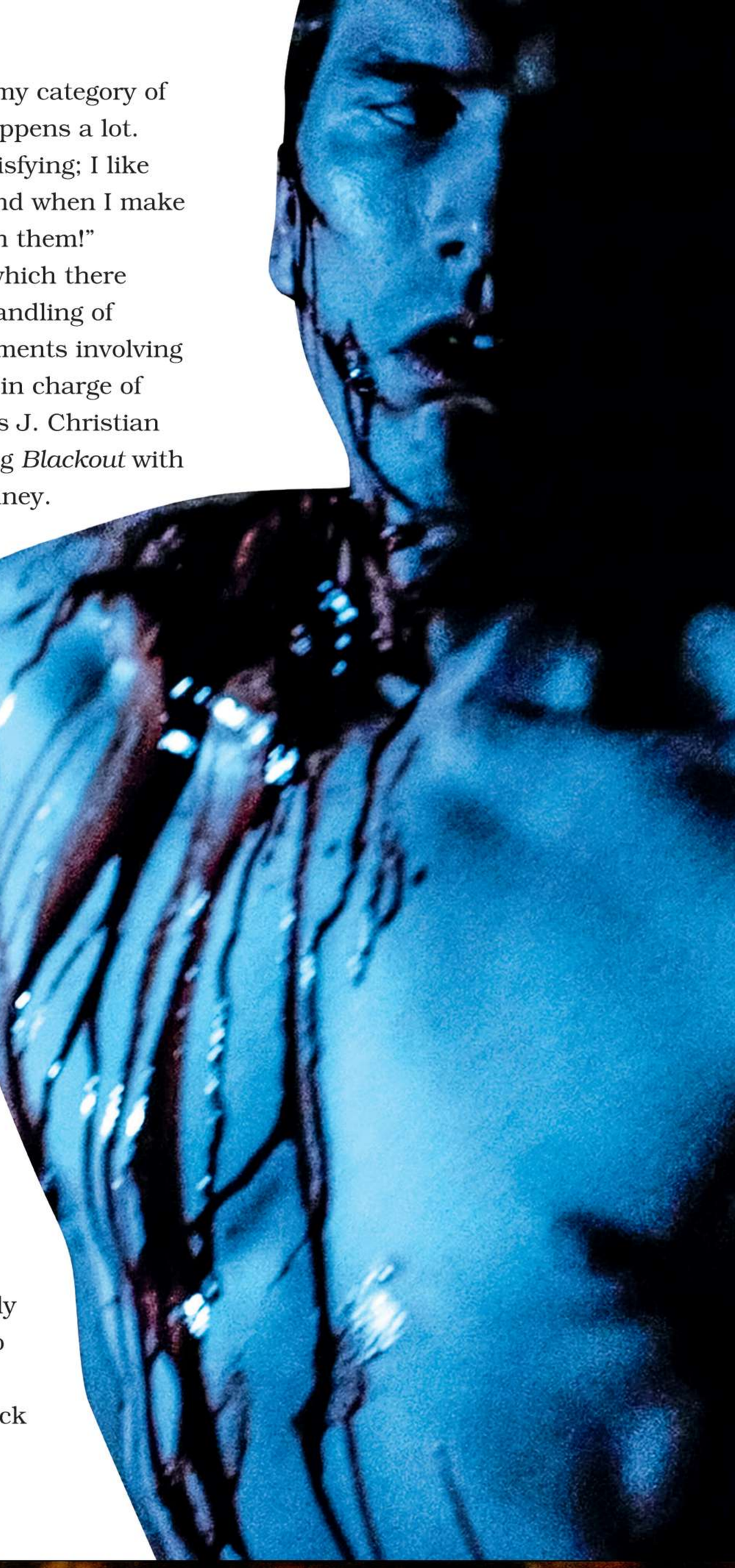
Fanning the flames of bigotry against Miguel and his fellow Hispanic workers is nasty real-estate developer Hammond (Marshall Bell). Charley has been working with a lawyer (Barbara Crampton) to expose Hammond's corrupt practices — a mission complicated by the fact that Hammond is the father of Charley's ex-girlfriend Sharon (Addison Timlin). Fango heads into the building, which is also serving as production HQ, for a few words with Bell, a familiar face from movies like *Total Recall*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2* and *Stand By Me*.

"Hammond is one of the town fathers, and he's been responsible for polluting the area," says Bell, who came aboard *Blackout* while it was already shooting. "I'm friends with James Le Gros, who's in this film and has worked with Larry before, and who asked him if it would be a good idea to cast me. One thing I like to do is to know my lines well in advance; I don't like to leave anything up for grabs. Except, there was a scene we just shot where I deliberately left it up for grabs, because I like the chaos of it! But I had enough notice on this one, and in my category of actor, that [last-minute casting] happens a lot. This has been really fun, really satisfying; I like the way the character is written, and when I make mistakes, they let me get away with them!"

One area of the production in which there is no room for mistakes is in the handling of firearms. There are a couple of moments involving guns on the schedule tonight, and in charge of safety where those are concerned is J. Christian (Chris) Ingvordsen, who's producing *Blackout* with Fessenden and James Felix McKenney. An indie New York filmmaking stalwart in his own right, Ingvordsen has helmed numerous action and horror films since the '80s, the former leading him to take on stunt coordination and armorer positions on *Blackout* as well, along with "ten other hats."

"Larry and I sort of had parallel career tracks, working out of New York City making independent films," Ingvordsen recalls, "but our first collaboration was in 2019 on his son Jack's film *Foxhole*." *Blackout*, he says, "is a very ambitious production. There are a lot of characters, a lot of locations — we're moving practically every day — stunts and car rigs, so it's very challenging."

It is also, he affirms, a throwback to old-school lycanthropictures. "Larry has a love for the classic



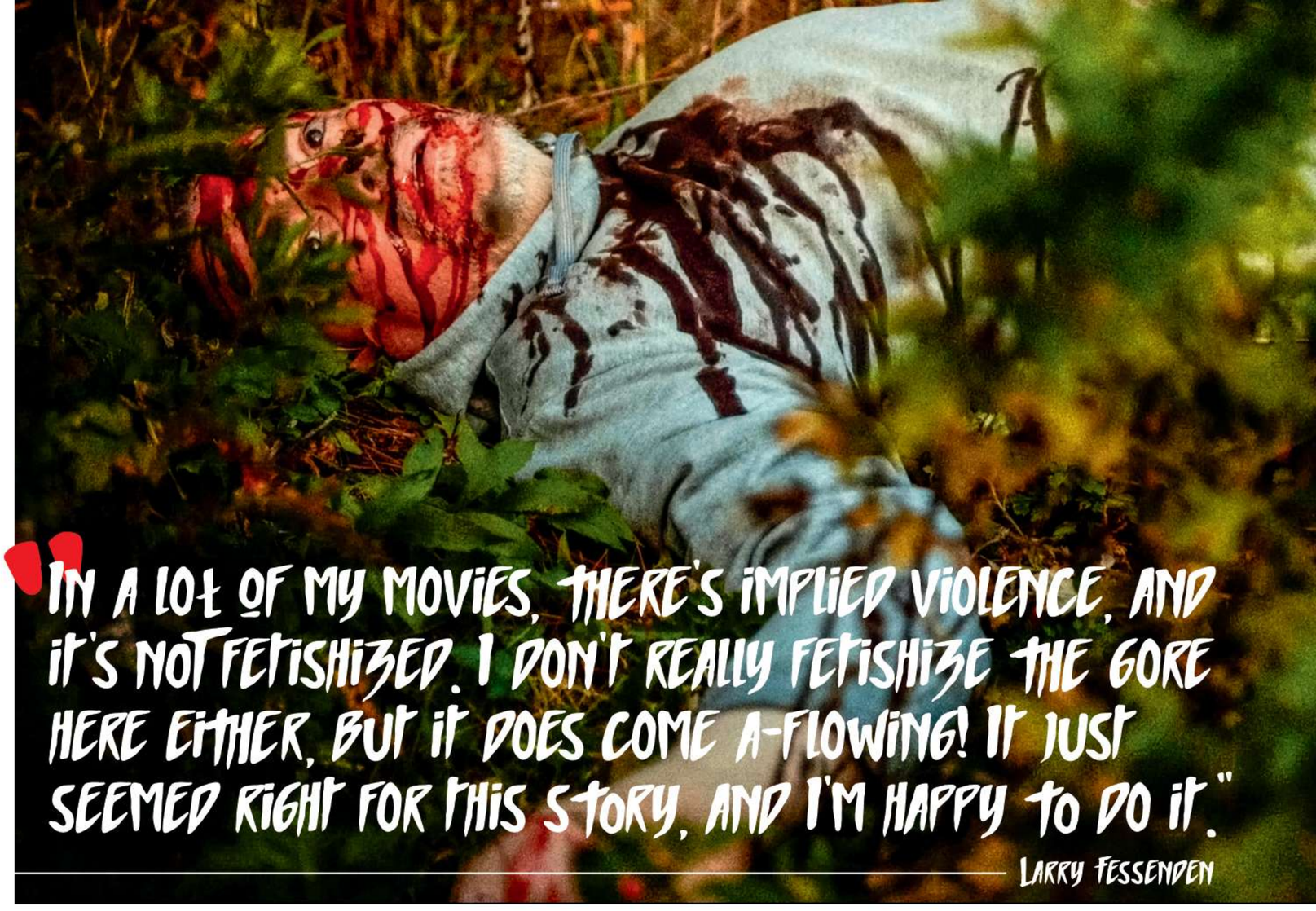
CHARLEY PARTAKES IN A FRESHWATER BATH TO RINSE OFF LAST NIGHT'S KILL (CLAY VON CARLOWITZ, TOP).

Universal monsters, so he's going for more of the Lon Chaney Jr. Wolf Man, rather than *The Howling* or Rick Baker kind of stuff. And he's really achieving an homage to the Old Hollywood way of doing it."

For a first-hand look at that approach, we head to the room where Hurt is undergoing his transformation in the makeup chair. In charge of *Blackout*'s prosthetics and special makeup are Brian Spears and Peter Gerner, the go-to effects artists for Fessenden's Glass Eye Pix dating back to 2008's *I Sell the Dead*. Their creation does indeed hark back to the Chaney look, as well as that of Henry Hull in the earlier *Werewolf of London* — though Fessenden also cites the title character of the Marvel comic *Werewolf by Night*, specifically as drawn by Mike Ploog, as another inspiration.

"We've been discussing this with Larry for a couple of years now — we were even talking about it on *Depraved* — and we were always going for the *Werewolf by Night* influence, which is very relevant right now," Spears says, referring to the Marvel/Disney+ movie that will be premiering later this week. "We can never compete with that, so we're trying something a little different, but still in that vein. We wanted to keep this kind of grounded in reality, and not to be the type of thing you usually see in a werewolf movie. Larry doesn't want to go over the top with it.

"We've done so many films with Larry that there's totally a shorthand between us now," Spears adds. "And his enthusiasm pushes us forward.


"IN A LOT OF MY MOVIES, THERE'S IMPLIED VIOLENCE, AND IT'S NOT FETISHIZED. I DON'T REALLY FETISHIZE THE GORE HERE EITHER, BUT IT DOES COME A-FLOWING! IT JUST SEEMED RIGHT FOR THIS STORY, AND I'M HAPPY TO DO IT."
LARRY FESSENDEN

He's like a little kid, standing by the monitor, making funny faces and growling. That has been the highlight, feeling like, 'I guess we're doing OK. He's really getting into it.'"

Hurt, son of the late actor William, is just as enthusiastic about taking on *Blackout*'s monstrous lead role. "Larry gave me this script almost two years ago," after Hurt had co-starred in *Foxhole*, he recalls. "He asked me if I was interested in doing it — and he knew I would be, because I'm a monster nut. *Frankenstein* was my first favorite film, from the time I was five years old, and Boris Karloff has been my hero since I was a kid.

"So we started getting into it, and I was very invested in the themes of the script," Hurt continues as his wolf face is applied. "Alcoholism is a big one, and American male grief — the inability to actually feel your feelings, as a man in America, is something that spoke to me a lot. And in one sense, I didn't have to prepare for the role, because my father passed away about three months ago, and that's also Charley's story. That's something that happens when you're an actor; you get parts that allow you to work through stuff, or use what's going on in your life to give a character real depth."

Hurt also began physical training, putting on 15 pounds of muscle for the role, before he and Fessenden decided that Charley's wolfman guise should be lean and mean. "I sent Larry a couple of images of wolves," the actor says, "and he said, 'I think that's right. Like the ribcage, we really need to see your ribcage.' I was like, 'Great, I'll go that way, and it will help to physicalize the character more.'"

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GLASS EYE PIX • BOTTOM RIGHT BY BAHRAM FOROUGHI

MAKEUP ARTIST BRIAN SPEARS (ASSISTED HERE BY KILLIAN FREEBORN) GIVES STAR ALEX HURT A DECIDEDLY RETRO LYCANTHROPE LOOK.

> "Larry has a love for the classic Universal monsters, so he's going for more of the Lon Chaney Jr. Wolf Man, rather than The Howling or Rick Baker kind of stuff."
>
> — J. Christian Ingvordsen

That process, in which the transformation is expressed in large part through Hurt's physical performance, also led Spears and Gerner to scale back some of their makeup concepts. "At one time, we were going to use way more hair, and make a full body suit for him," Spears reveals. "But when he's wolfing out and contorting his neck and body, if you put hair on that, you lose all that definition and all that detail."

The final stage of Charley's wolfed-out visage is impressive seen in person — decidedly bestial, while still allowing Hurt to convey the man behind the monster. And now the time has come to see the werewolf in action on the police station set, complete with a small jail cell to one side. Tacked to a large cork board on one wall are newspaper articles and photographic evidence of the mysterious killer's rampage, including shots of the bloodied, naked bodies of a couple slain in the film's opening scene, played by Asta Paredes and Clay von Carlowitz. These bear out Fessenden's assertion that *Blackout* will be his goriest feature yet.

"Werewolf movies are about the kill and then the guilt, so you have to have it," the filmmaker says. "In a lot of my movies, there's implied violence, and it's not fetishized. I don't really fetishize the gore here either, but it does come a-flowing [*laughs*]! It just seemed right for this story, and I'm happy to do it, and I think it will be the usual thing in my films, which is that you're very sad for the people who get killed. It's not for the thrill. I usually try to spend a little time getting to know even unexpected characters arriving in the movie briefly, like to rescue someone who's been in an accident, and then they get whacked. It's my usual unfair universe kind of story."

As the camera rolls and Fango looks on, one character (we won't reveal who, as this scene occurs toward the end of the film) suffers the wolfman's wrath, losing a hand and then their life to the savage beast. Hurt's performance throughout the sequence, both physical and emotional, is powerful stuff, and watching this and other scenes shot tonight, it's clear that *Blackout* will be a unique addition to the lycanthropy subgenre, as only Fessenden can deliver it.

"I'm a very personal filmmaker," he says. "Everyone knows that, and I bring my own take to these wonderful, iconic characters. That's what you get in a Fessenden movie; it doesn't work for everybody, but I think it will be fun. And we have an amazing cast — 30 different actors, most from Glass Eye movies or films I've been associated with, everyone from Barbara Crampton to Marshall Bell to Joe Swanberg and James Le Gros and Addison Timlin. Most of them are on for only a day or two, so it'll be like a Robert Altman film — not in its quality, but in its texture of having so many different people on screen. And a lot of them encounter the werewolf, and things don't go well for them!" 💀

WRITER/DIRECTOR LARRY FESSENDEN KEEPS HIS MONSTER MOVIE MOVING.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GLASS EYE PIX • TOP LEFT AND FACING BY NELSON KAKERMAN • LEFT BOTTOM BY BAHRAM FOROUGHI

LARRY FESSENDEN'S MONSTERVERSE?

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

As he is a longtime maverick, independent filmmaker, it's not surprising that Larry Fessenden has mixed feelings about the recent crop of screen blockbusters. "I don't love the Marvel movies, but I appreciate why other people love them," he says. "Same with *Star Wars*; I don't really care about those, but I know what fun it is when you give yourself over to a universe."

And that's why (SPOILER ALERT), at the very end of *Blackout*, Fessenden drops the kind of quick world-building scene familiar from the end credits of MCU features. It's a simple shot of the movie's wolfman, Charley (Alex Hurt), coming across Adam (Alex Breaux), the Frankensteinian monster from the filmmaker's previous *Depraved*.

DEPRAVED'S ADAM (ALEX BREUX) AND *BLACKOUT*'S CHARLEY (ALEX HURT) COULD MEET UP IN A FUTURE FESSENDEN FILM.

It's a signal that Fessenden intends to bring together the characters from three of his pictures into his own little "monsterverse"—much as Universal combined their classic fiends back in the '40s. To that end, the filmmaker staged the photo he exclusively shares with FANGORIA here, with Breaux and Hurt re-enacting a famous posed shot from 1943's *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man*.

"The idea is, I made [1997's vampire drama] *Habit* as a stand-alone picture — although I had already made it once before — and I always said I'd make it again, but I haven't gotten around to that yet," Fessenden explains. "Then I made *Depraved*, so I've done a vampire movie and a Frankenstein movie, and I knew I had to make a werewolf film, because that has always been one of my favorite monsters — much more than vampires, by the way. And as I wrote *Blackout*, I was already imagining the sequel, where all of the monsters from those three movies would encounter each other."

He was inspired by his childhood love of the Universal "monster rally" films that began with *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man*, in which Lon Chaney Jr. reprised the latter role while Bela Lugosi portrayed the former. "As a kid, that was very exciting, even though we all know Bela Lugosi didn't look very good in his makeup!" Fessenden laughs. "But in all those movies, even though they're flawed and quite silly, there's always some image that is haunting, and the Wolf Man and the Frankenstein Monster fighting was so fantastic. And then after the money came in, they decided, 'Well, why can't we have three monsters, and Boris Karloff as a mad doctor?' and they made *House of Frankenstein* and *House of Dracula*. I still find them very amusing."

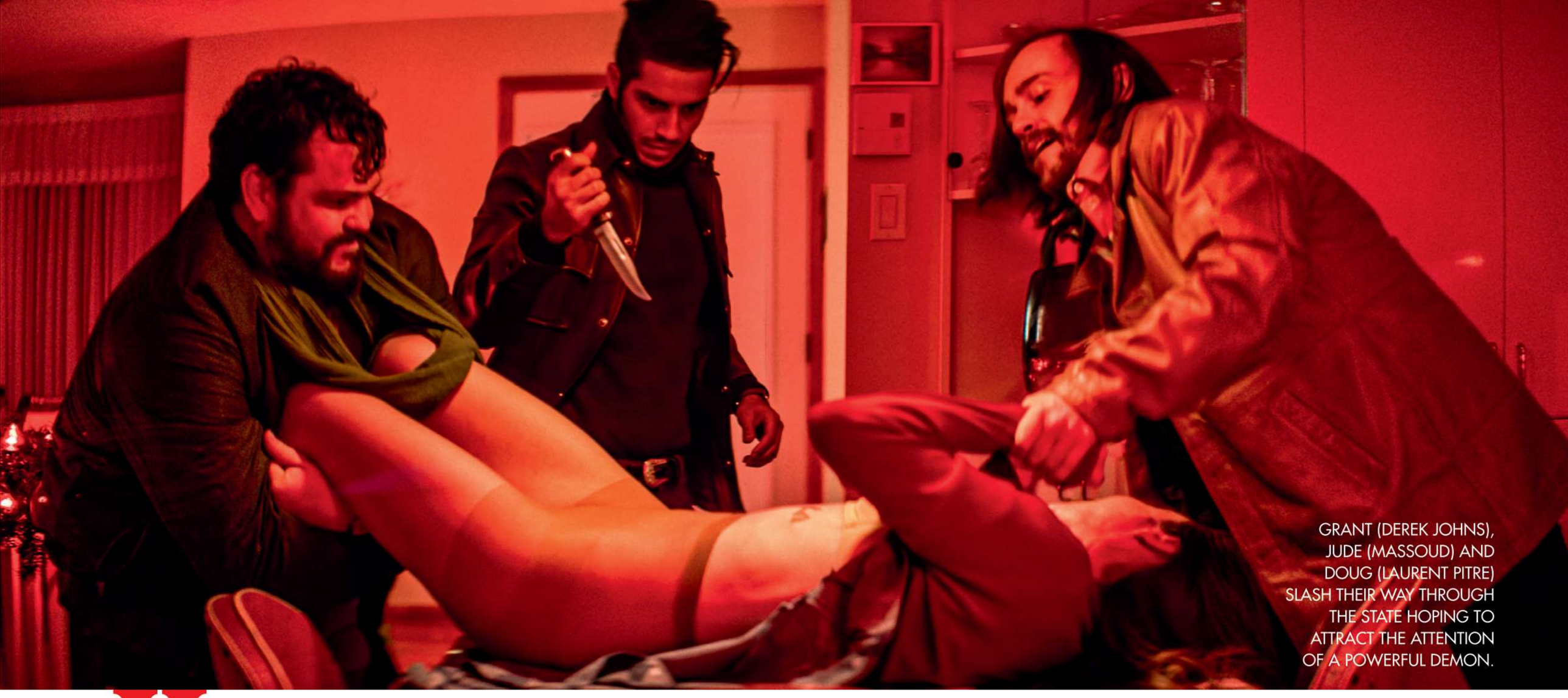
He acknowledges that bringing together Charley, Alex and his *Habit* bloodsucker "would be so absurd, and such a callback to the old Universal movies, that at first it would almost seem like a satire. But the idea is to twist it, so that it actually becomes frightening. That's the puzzle. I haven't written it yet, but I love thinking about the idea of my own monsterverse, and the interconnectedness of things. I'm making modern versions of those films I loved as a kid, so of course I'm interested in exploring other themes and textures by combining the characters from my own mythology, where each monster means something." 💀

SATAN'S COMING TO TOWN

Jenn Wexler's THE SACRIFICE GAME brings a car-load of demon worshippers to a not-quite-abandoned girls' school over the Christmas break.

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

ALADDIN'S MENA MASSOUD (RIGHT, PICTURED WITH GUS KENWORTHY) ENTERS A WHOLE NEW WORLD IN *THE SACRIFICE GAME*.



GRANT (DEREK JOHNS), JUDE (MASSOUD) AND DOUG (LAURENT PITRE) SLASH THEIR WAY THROUGH THE STATE HOPING TO ATTRACT THE ATTENTION OF A POWERFUL DEMON.

Having introduced a new psycho/slasher character in her debut feature, 2018's *The Ranger*, director Jenn Wexler tells a twistier tale of both human and supernatural evil in her second film, *The Sacrifice Game*. Some of the movie's best qualities can't be discussed without giving some of its secrets away, so now that the movie has been playing on Shudder for a little while, FANGORIA can present an interview we conducted with Wexler following *Game*'s world premiere at last year's Fantasia International Film Festival, and a chat with Wexler and stars Georgia Acken and Olivia Scott Welch (thanks to a SAG-AFTRA interim agreement) at the subsequent Brooklyn Horror Film Festival. (Warning: SPOILERS follow…)

CHLOË LEVINE (AS ROSE) REUNITES WITH *THE RANGER* DIRECTOR JENN WEXLER FOR *THE SACRIFICE GAME*.

Acken plays Clara, one of a small handful of students and faculty staying behind at the isolated Blackvale School for Girls during Christmas break 1971, after everyone else has headed home. Welch is Maisie, part of a cult of four headed by the vicious Jude (*Aladdin*'s Mena Massoud) who descend upon the academy with a dark purpose. They've already staged a massacre at a suburban home, and the innocents at Blackvale seem perfect for the group to help realize their desire to raise an ancient demon.

Wexler first conceived *The Sacrifice Game* while working at Glass Eye Pix, where she served as a producer on Mickey Keating's *Darling*, Ana Asensio's *Most Beautiful Island* and others. Realizing that *The Sacrifice Game* was a bit too big to be her debut as director, she tackled *The Ranger* instead; she then returned to *Game*, making her own contribution to the venerable trend of Yuletide terror features, set during one of the genre's most fertile decades.

"In the overall concept," she notes, "we're dealing with the idea of feeling trapped somewhere, and not getting along with your family, and finding family and a home in the place and the circumstances you're in. That all spoke very well to Christmas in terms of those themes, and the setup. Samantha [Madison Baines] and Clara are stuck there over Christmas; they're the weird girls, and they can't go home to their families. I liked the idea of this deserted, isolated boarding school where there's nobody else around for miles.

BLINK AND YOU'LL MISS THIS GLIMPSE OF CLARA'S TRUE FORM.

"In terms of the '70s," she continues, "we drew on a lot of influences from that era, like *The Last House on the Left* and *Black Christmas* and *Suspiria*, and playing with demonic and sacrifice tropes; we had *The Exorcist* on our minds. Then we found resonances in the politics of that time: how the system sacrificed the individual, drafting teenage boys and sending them to get killed in Vietnam. And there was the Manson influence from *Helter Skelter*; it's such a horrifying story, and yet we're all collectively fascinated, in a fucked-up way, by what happened there."

There are certainly Manson vibes in the presentation of Jude and his followers, but the quartet, also including Doug (Laurent Pitre) and Grant (Derek Johns), are in for a big surprise once they begin their rituals. The nature of that reversal changed once Wexler and her life and writing partner Sean Redlitz dove back into the *Sacrifice Game* script after *The Ranger*'s release. "He made a suggestion that totally unlocked the movie," Wexler says. "Originally, in my first draft, Clara became possessed by the demon, and then Sean suggested, 'What if Clara is the demon?' I thought that was awesome; it made her character way more active, and the whole project feel more exciting."

The revelation of Clara as the evil presence flips the scenario on its head, and gives Acken (who was just 14 when she filmed this, her feature-film debut) a chance to impress with her transition from victimized innocence to supernatural agency. "When I first read the script," Acken recalls, "I was so excited because I love demon movies; *The Exorcist* has always been one of my favorite films. So that twist was thrilling for me to read.

"I was a little bit overwhelmed at first by the idea of playing something that isn't human," she continues, "and doesn't have the same kind of emotions as all the other characters. But it does develop them as Clara finds her friendship with Samantha during the movie, and learns how to feel. And it was cool to play the arc of knowing what was going to happen in the story from the beginning, and then trying to figure out, 'OK, how am I going to show this a little bit so that when you go back and watch the movie again, you can tell what's going to happen?' – but it won't be too obvious for people watching it for the first time."

Acken's casting came with an unexpected benefit, as Wexler reveals: "Her father James Acken, who came to set with her, has this crazy background as a medieval scholar. He knows everything about the most obscure mythology, and he knows Latin, so we quickly said, 'OK, you're our consultant.' He told us the right way to pronounce the Latin, he wrote some for the characters to speak, and he brought so much information. It gave the film a larger feel, that there's a greater mythology behind it, which was very helpful."

The director had been impressed by Welch's performances in Netflix's *Fear Street* trilogy and the Amazon series *Panic*, and Welch became the first actor officially attached to *The Sacrifice Game*. In fact, she was involved enough early on that she won credit as an executive producer as well.

"I had never gotten a straight-up offer for a movie before, so that was pretty cool – thanks, Jenn!" she

THE "FAMILY" THAT SLAYS TOGETHER STAYS TOGETHER: JOHNS, MASSOUD AND OLIVIA SCOTT WELCH AS MAISIE.

AS DOUG, LAURENT PITRE (WITH MADISON BAINES) REALLY TURNED ON THE MANSON LAMPS.

"WHENEVER SOMEBODY GETS KILLED IN THE FILM, THE EFFECTS WERE SO GOOD THAT IT LOOKED LIKE THEY WERE BEING KILLED IN REAL LIFE."

- GEORGIA ACKEN

says. "When I read the script, it felt like this would be so much fun, the chance to be in a movie with such an incredible twist. It was also cool to do something that was period, and to play someone who's evil, but not just the villain. It was also a chance to go about the project in a different way and talk to the director from the beginning, do more collaborative things with the character, and come in on the ground floor of making a film, instead of just jumping in at the tail end of the process as you usually do. It was neat to be part of the procedure of something getting made, and being in on the secrets of how that happens."

The role of Jude was something of a game-changer for Massoud, following his turn as the singing and dancing hero of *Aladdin*. While he clearly revels in playing such a wicked role on screen, his collaborators remember him as being very different behind the scenes. "He was just lovely," Acken says. "I had seen *Aladdin* in the theater, and when I found out he was playing Jude, it was like, 'Really? How cool is that!'"

"He was so prepared," Welch says. "There were times when he had monologues, and he could do them over and over and over again. He always came into the scenes with ideas, and also with the professionalism, and it was just neat to work with him. He's a great guy."

"There was also a lot of physical stuff he had to do," Wexler adds, "and he was great about being really into it when the camera was rolling. Then I'd call 'Cut,' and suddenly he was out of it. He understood, and was great at being in and out of the moment. He was not Method at all, and he was super-aware of all the safety concerns when it came to the stunts."

"He's great at stunts!" Welch raves. "But then, I was like, 'This is one-billion-dollar-movie stunt training you've got there. I see what's going on!'"

Once Quebec-based producers Philip Kalin-Hajdu and Albert Melamed came aboard the film, they showed Wexler around a number of potential Blackvales, including the Abbey of Notre-Dame du Lac in Oka. "Just stepping onto the property, I fell in love with it," she remembers. "It had a classic, beautiful European feel, and from the moment we did our first scout there, I was like, 'This is it – we have to shoot here.' "

GEORGIA ACKEN (CLARA) KILLS IT IN HER FIRST FEATURE ROLE.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHUDDER

The old place's atmosphere certainly made an impression on the cast. "It was super-haunted!" Acken exclaims. "It was really terrifying. It helped with the feeling of being scared, because it was so spooky there, especially when we were filming down in the basement with all the scratches on the walls and stuff."

"Funnily enough, there were prison cells in the basement," Wexler adds. "Everybody was like, what the hell went on down here? But actually, they were from another production that had left those sets behind."

"I kept going to Phil, saying, 'This is one of those MKUltra sites. I feel it in my bones!'" Welch laughs. "He'd tell me, 'It's not, this is from another movie,' and I was like, 'Right, of course!' And at one point, someone stole all our wigs. It was the last day of production, or close to it. They would have weddings at the abbey, and we got back on the Monday after a wedding had happened, and they were gone. Probably some drunk people at the wedding stole them. Either that or ghosts!"

For her part, Wexler didn't leave herself open to perceive any paranormal phenomena on set. "I was very in my headspace of making the movie," she says. "I was like, 'Stay out of my head, ghosts! I need to focus!' But other people experienced things like candles falling over on their own, weird noises in the basement, some electrical stuff; apparently an eyeline marker on the camera went flying."

The other key location was the house seen in that opening scene, murderously invaded by Jude and co. as the camera prowls and observes their bloodletting from outside. This home was practically around the corner from the abbey, and chosen for its '60s look. "The way we talked about it was that there's a connection happening between the gang and Clara," Wexler explains, "and I wanted to set that up right away. We wanted the camera to move like we were in Clara's perspective, and she's following the gang and peeking through the windows. Another influence for that scene was *A Clockwork Orange*, to the point where Grant lifts the woman and spins her around. The colors are also kind of in that world, though more red in ours than orange. It has that giallo feel, with the reds and the greens."

For the red stuff they physically spilled on set, the *Sacrifice Game* team brought in Montreal-based makeup effects supervisor Adrien Morot, whose long list of credits was recently highlighted by the creation of *M3GAN*'s deadly doll and Oscar-winning work on *The Whale*. "He designed everything, and then he had his team on set implementing it all," Wexler says. "I had my own ideas about the effects from writing the script and living with it for so long, and it was so cool to have someone with so much experience consider those concepts and then make them a thousand times better, in ways I never would have even thought of."

"Whenever somebody gets killed in the film, the effects were so good that it looked like they were being killed in real life," Acken praises. "You'd be doing the scene and watching it, and it looked in person exactly like how it looks on film. Everything seemed so real when we were shooting it, so that was super-intense."

"During the scene where we're doing the ritual and having to set all the skin pieces out, I was like, this is so upsetting," Welch says. "Having these pieces that fit together like a puzzle, it was so crazy. And I was always painting blood on things. That paintbrush was like my Harley Quinn prop; that's what it felt like during filming. I was thinking, 'This is like my baseball bat, this paintbrush of blood.'

"Then there was the time when Chloë Levine [playing Blackvale teacher Rose] had been lying on the floor for so long, and I remember saying, 'Chloë, are you OK?' And she was like [*brightly*], 'Oh, I'm good! [*Laughs*] I've been totally in a meditative state the whole time.' It was so funny."

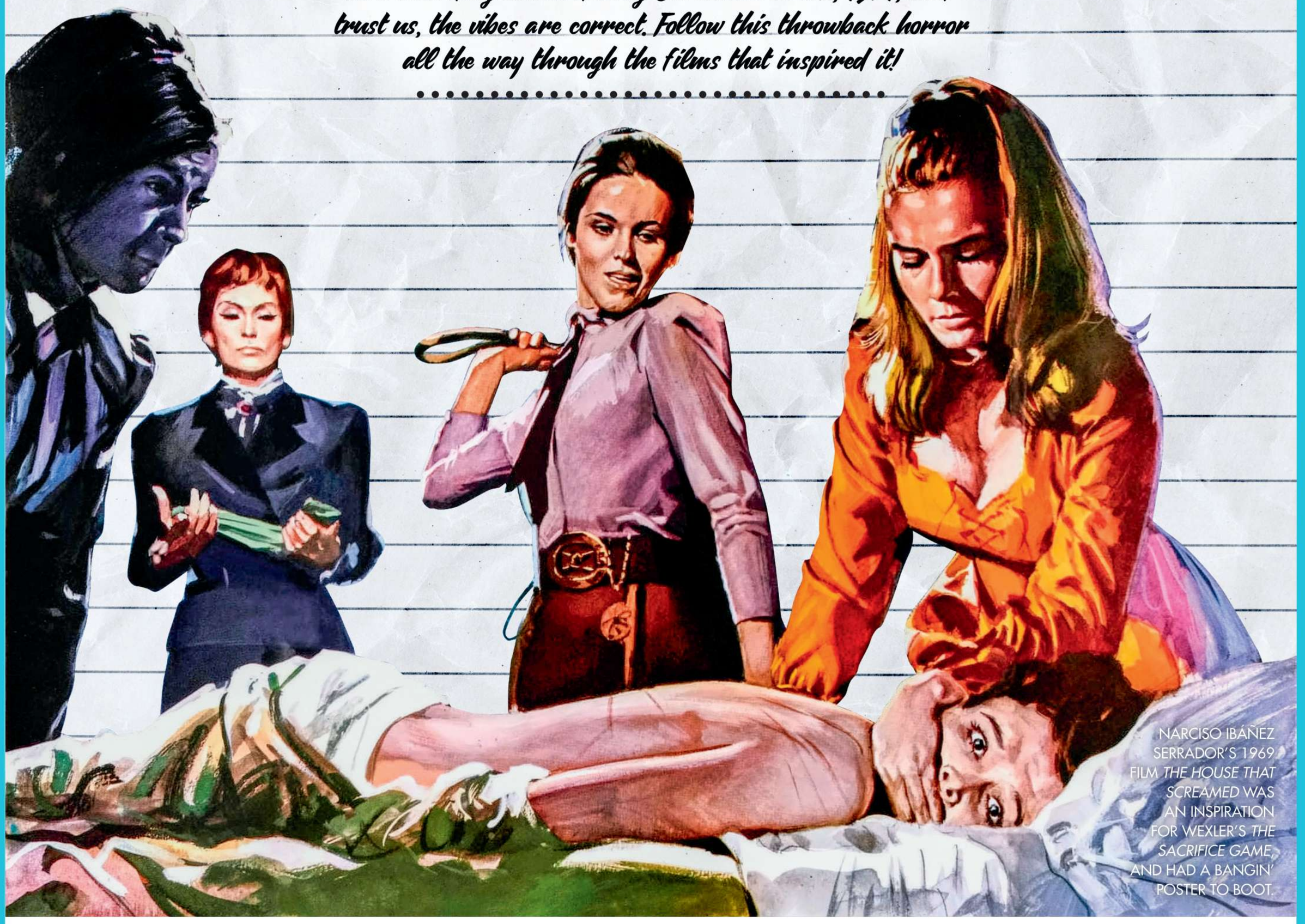
There's a hint at the end of *The Sacrifice Game* that a couple of the surviving characters could head into further screen adventures. On the subject of potential sequels, Wexler says there has been, "not official talk, but some throwing around of ideas, internally. This is a world that I love, and I want to keep being in it." At the time of this writing, her next film is likely to be *Rachel*, "a paranoid sci-fi thriller" she's hoping to get rolling once the actors' strike is over.

Meanwhile, looking to follow in her director's footsteps, Acken has finished shooting her first short film, a ghost story called *Look* starring her younger sister and her sister's best friend. She says she "one hundred percent" took cues from the experience of watching Wexler work. "Jenn was so good at communicating her vision, and supportive and kind to everybody. It was so inspiring to see her on set and to collaborate with her every single day for a month. I just wanted to take notes the entire time." 💀

By Meredith Borders

SCHOOL Spirit

Jenn Wexler's The Sacrifice Game is set at a boarding school during Christmas break, 1971, and trust us, the vibes are correct. Follow this throwback horror all the way through the films that inspired it!



NARCISO IBÁÑEZ SERRADOR'S 1969 FILM *THE HOUSE THAT SCREAMED* WAS AN INSPIRATION FOR WEXLER'S *THE SACRIFICE GAME*, AND HAD A BANGIN' POSTER TO BOOT.

Locked doors, dim hallways, captive teens and isolated estates. Do you even need to ask why boarding schools make for a perfect horror setting? And out on Shudder now, Jenn Wexler's *The Sacrifice Game* takes full advantage of this dark indoor playground (*read more on page 34*). On December 22, 1971, students Clara (Georgia Acken) and Samantha (Madison Baines) and teacher Rose (Chloë Levine) are stuck at the Blackvale School for Girls over the Christmas holiday. That's a bummer, sure, but it becomes something much worse when a group of demon-raising hopefuls arrive looking to spill a bunch of innocent blood.

Wexler opened up to Fango about some of the films that inspired her dark, surprising, riotous film, and just what makes boarding school horror so compelling. "I grew up in suburban New Jersey and went to the local public high school, which was about as far as you could get aesthetically from the mysterious, romantic boarding schools that I saw in film and read about in books," she says. "Boarding schools always struck me as places for adventure, with gothic architecture, shrouded histories, and secrets around every corner, so setting *The Sacrifice Game* at a boarding school gave me a chance to live out those early teen dreams."

The film's setting is mantled in horror history. Boarding school horror had a big moment in the '70s and '80s, though one of the first horror films to haunt those halls of ivy was Clouzot's 1955 psychological thriller *Les Diaboliques*. It wasn't until after 1969's *The House That Screamed*, however, that a new boarding school fright flick would hit screens every couple of years, including all-timer classics like *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and Argento's contributions *Phenomena* and *Suspiria*. (We'll put aside university housing slashers like *Black Christmas* and *The House on Sorority Row* for the time being, because that's a whole other ballgame.)

But the sub-genre seemed to dry up in 1987 after Ron Link's *Zombie High* (the film's a blast, so we don't blame it). Other than a quick detour from Haddonfield for

ZOMBIE HIGH, *SUSPIRIA* (1977) AND *PHENOMENA* ALL HELPED SHAPE BOARDING SCHOOL HORROR INTO WHAT IT IS TODAY.

Halloween H20, Steve Miner's 1998 sequel that brings Laurie Strode and her son (and, alas, brother) to a boarding school in California, there weren't many other films exploring the horrors of a live-in educational institution for well over a decade. In 2001, Guillermo del Toro's elegant haunter *The Devil's Backbone* started the trend back up again, continuing ever since with films like *Cry Wolf*, *The Woods*, *The Awakening*, *Suspiria* (2018), *The Blackcoat's Daughter*, *Down a Dark Hall*, *Séance* and, relevant here, Mary Harron's 2011 gothic horror *The Moth Diaries*.

It's relevant because the influences for *The Sacrifice Game* go down, down, down to the very stone floors the students walk (and bleed) upon. Blackvale School for Girls is, in reality, the Abbey of Notre-Dame du Lac in Oka, Québec, where a big portion of *The Moth Diaries* was filmed. And, Wexler lets on, "Our headmistress played by Kathleen Fee plays a teacher who gets killed in that film."

But it takes more than spooky buildings to evoke a dread as precisely honed as *The Sacrifice Game*'s. Luckily, Wexler was able to draw from a rich well. "We set the film in 1971, and I took inspiration from some great boarding school movies from that period, including proto-slasher *The House That Screamed*, teen-girls-doing-very-bad-things flick *Don't Deliver Us From Evil*, made-for-TV cult classic *Satan's School for Girls*, and *Suspiria*, if you want to count that as a boarding school movie." (We do.) "I also love Argento's *Phenomena*, and my second favorite *Halloween* after the original is *Halloween H20* – partly because of that deserted boarding school setting," Wexler reveals.

All classics, all bangers, but Wexler goes a little deeper over the course of our conversation. "Something sparked in my subconscious," she says. "I had flashes of a movie I loved when I was ten years old but couldn't remember the name. After a Google deep-dive I've tracked it down!"

Yes, folks, you're reading in real-time the reunion of an artist and her innermost muse: Wexler rediscovered her fondness for Jane Simpson's 1996 film *Little Witches*, starring Jennifer Rubin, Jack Nance and the great Zelda Rubinstein (*Poltergeist*). Wexler points out that the film was "Clea DuVall's first feature, also about teen girls who stay at their boarding school over a holiday break (Easter, in this case) and get into demonic mischief. I haven't seen it in decades but on a deep level I think it was also an influence on *The Sacrifice Game*. I must have owned the VHS because I remember watching it on repeat."

This is the great thing about stories set in the shadowy corridors and repressive atmosphere of a boarding school. It's an endless field of inspiration, but not too many filmmakers have worked in that space. And *The Sacrifice Game* goes far beyond and beneath the trappings of any one of the categories it fits into: it's not only a '70-set demonic slasher, a Christmas horror or a scary movie set at a boarding school. All of those things make it very, very fun, but there's more going on behind the closed doors of The Blackvale School for Girls.

"*The Sacrifice Game* deals with feelings of isolation and longing for connection, which is especially the case when you're a teenager and have little control over your own circumstances," Wexler says. "Where better to explore those emotions than at a near-empty girls' boarding school over Christmas?" 💀

WE DON'T ACTUALLY REMEMBER MICHELLE WILLIAMS WEARING A BLACK COCKTAIL DRESS IN *HALLOWEEN H20*, BUT WE LIKE THIS FIT BETTER THAN HER PRIVATE SCHOOL UNIFORM.

BRYCE MCGUIRE
AND BLUMHOUSE
INVITE YOU TO A

NIGHT SWIM

By Brett Gallman

Bryce McGuire's fascination with aquatic horror began in a familiar place: a childhood viewing of *Jaws*. While Steven Spielberg's seminal shark movie made most people think twice about going into the ocean, McGuire became uneasy about his family's swimming pool. "I was nine years old, watching *Jaws* for the first time," he says. "We were in a swimming pool at night, and my younger brother was flipping off the lights. Even though I knew that the pool was only 9 feet deep and 22 feet long, my brain went into this primal place of being convinced there was something beneath me that wanted to eat me." The ordeal put him on the path to harnessing that primal fear in his own filmmaking years later: "I'm still terrified of that experience, and it's the origin of me trying to ruin that swimming pool forever."

McGuire first dipped his toes into this realm with *Night Swim*, a 2014 short film about a young woman (Megalyn Echikunwoke) haunted by an unknown presence during a swim. Nearly a decade later, McGuire has returned with a feature film take, something he felt was inevitable after the reaction to the short film. "People responded strongly, and I thought we'd tapped into something," he explains, adding that the feature took time to come to fruition. "There's always a journey with these things, and I didn't really pursue it as a feature until I found the right idea for the full-length story."

After cracking that idea, McGuire shaped the short film into the tale of an all-American family who moves into a new home with an alluring pool. Former baseball player Ray Waller (Wyatt Russell), who was forced into retirement by a degenerative illness, convinces his wife Eve (Kerry Condon) that this will be an ideal home because the pool will provide fun for the kids and physical therapy for him. Instead, the family discovers their new home has a mysterious history and unleashes a malevolent presence that warps their idyllic new life into a nightmare. Even though he had that primal hook, McGuire knew he needed more than just a series of scares in order to turn this premise into a feature film. "I wanted it to be a real story, not just a repetitive gag of going 'boo' in the pool," he says. "I wanted to have something that was really scary, mysterious, had great characters, and had something to say."

Blumhouse executive Ryan Turek was a fan of McGuire's short film, and he was especially eager to see how it would be expanded to feature length. "It was cool to see how he had fleshed out the mythology of the short film because that's always a challenge, isn't it?" he wonders aloud, comparing the project to *Lights Out* and other popular short films that became features. "And what Bryce had accomplished was creating a very Amblin-esque film, almost like *Poltergeist* in tone." Turek was especially drawn to the "wishing well" hook of the story, which finds the pool granting wishes that come with a horrific price. "The pool gives you something and takes it at the same time," he teases. "Ray starts to progressively get better, and it's more than just the physical therapy. There's something very supernatural behind his recovery, and of course, with any kind of monkey's paw or wishing well story, it takes a dark turn."

McGuire was also drawn to this story's potential to explore and subvert a conventional portrait of American suburbia. "It's part of the American Dream, right?" he muses. "Growing up, having a swimming pool meant that you were in the middle class. It was status." According to McGuire, the pool in *Night Swim* represents all of this and so much more for the Waller family. "They're a family that's struggling and going through this

> "I REALLY WANTED TO TAP INTO EVERYONE'S UNIVERSAL FEARS AND TURN THOSE INTO TERRIFYING SET PIECES."
>
> - BRYCE MCGUIRE

PHOTOS COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES • BOTTOM BY ANNE MARIE FOX

"THE POOL REPRESENTS A FRESH START... IT'S THIS SIREN CALL OF THE AMERICAN DREAM."

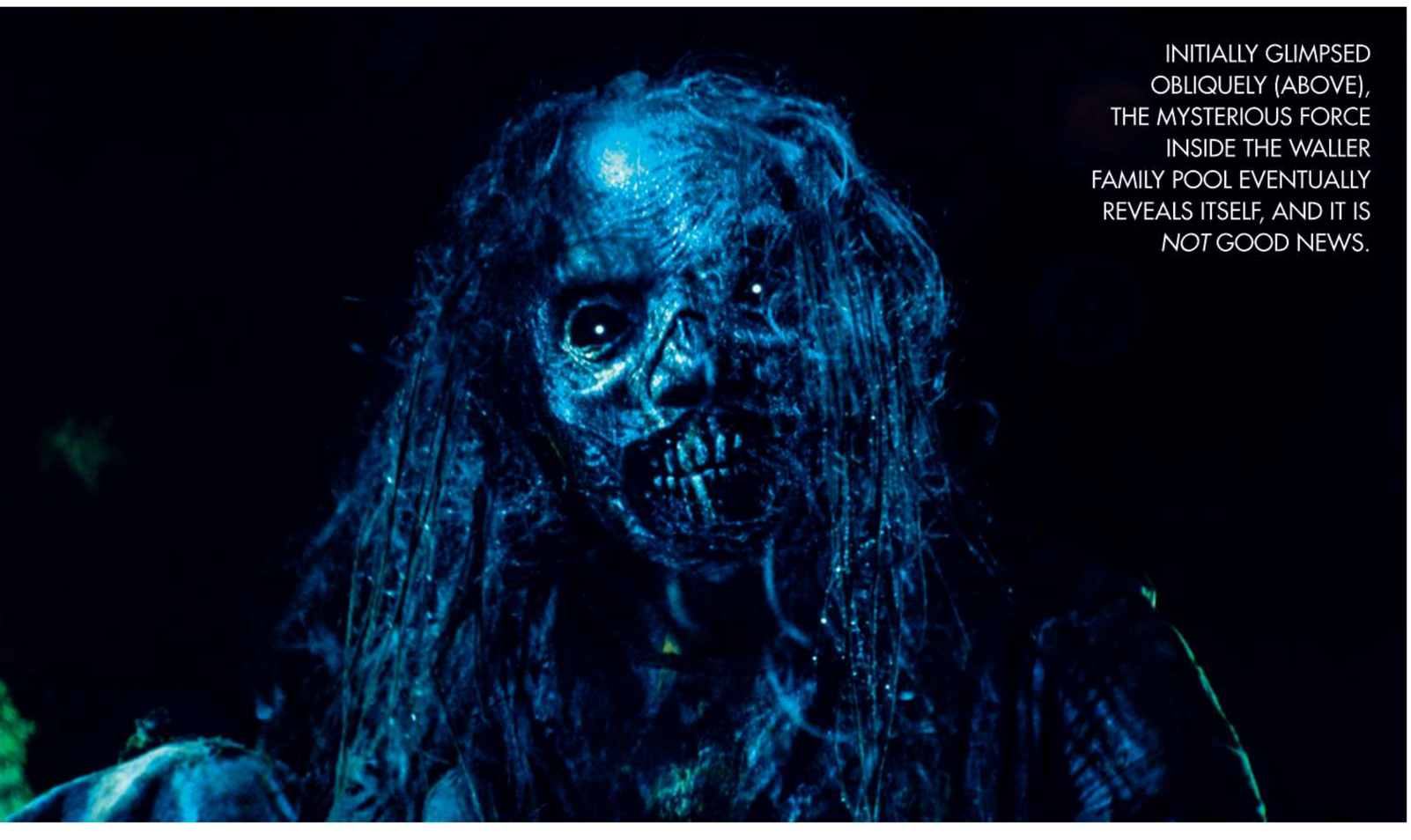
- BRYCE MCGUIRE

moment of transition, and the pool represents a fresh start," he continues. "It's something that can bring them all together, and it's this siren call of the American Dream." Much of the film's horror arises out of the family's creeping realization that this halcyon existence is too good to be true: "Of course, there's more to it than that, and things aren't always what they seem — there's something terrifying and that they don't understand," McGuire says.

For Turek, McGuire's subversion of suburbia is a continuation of a thread started by earlier Blumhouse productions like *Insidious*, *Sinister*, and *The Black Phone*. He notes that it's particularly exciting because McGuire's vision is so distinct from those previous outings thanks to a different perspective. "Scott Derrickson has spoken about his upbringing in Denver and how violent childhood can be, and *The Black Phone* showed us his depiction of American suburban life," he explains. "And here you have Bryce McGuire, who lives out in Tennessee, and he has a different, more hopeful view of American suburbs that's idealistic." That idealism often clashes with the horrors unfolding on the screen, creating a dark sense of irony as the Wallers wrestle with their fate. "There's a scene in the movie where the family gets some bad news, and they're driving through this American neighborhood," Turek describes. "It's a quaint little neighborhood, with families playing on their front lawns and the kind of happiness and optimism that comes with it, but we're seeing it from the Wallers' point-of-view." Keeping up with the Joneses never sounded so horrifying.

Director of photography Charlie Sarroff, who lensed recent horror hits *Relic* and *Smile*, was instrumental in capturing the suburban gothic. "Charlie is an amazing DP," McGuire raves. "He's a great person to collaborate with because he has so many good ideas. He really wanted to capture that feeling of Americana and nostalgia." He goes on to describe some of the picturesque imagery that creates a cozy suburban portrait that's eventually upended. "You see that blue water and the sun shining off the surface, people doing cannonballs, rafts floating, and it's almost hypnotic," he says. "It lulls you into that false sense of security, but it's not safe."

Night Swim is also out to exploit every horrifying thing your parents ever warned you about before letting you go swimming. McGuire was drawn to the "universal experiences we've all had with the pool" and set his mind to finding the horror within them: "reaching into that drain box, cleaning out the filter, not swimming after you eat, running outside the pool, getting your hair caught in the drain at the bottom." Mining these scenarios for scares was part of a "sadistic challenge," McGuire admits. "These loom so large in our mythology, and



INITIALLY GLIMPSED OBLIQUELY (ABOVE), THE MYSTERIOUS FORCE INSIDE THE WALLER FAMILY POOL EVENTUALLY REVEALS ITSELF, AND IT IS *NOT* GOOD NEWS.

I really wanted to tap into everyone's universal fears and turn those into these memorable, terrifying set pieces."

To that end, McGuire sees *Night Swim* as following in the footsteps of iconic horror thrill rides. Echoing Turek's comparison to *Poltergeist*, he also cites the influence of M. Night Shyamalan on this "supernatural thriller" that's going to "give you new things to be afraid of." When describing the tone of the film, McGuire paints a familiar genre picture of Norman Rockwell's Americana turned inside-out. "I definitely wanted it to feel very fun and nostalgic, but also have a real mystery to it," he reveals. "It was important to have a story that unfolds, and you don't know where it's going."

One of McGuire's most obvious influences was on set in the form of producer James Wan, whose haunted house thrillers have become genre staples over the past fifteen years. Hailing Wan as "the master of contemporary horror," McGuire embraces any comparison *Night Swim* may draw to those films. "This owes a lot to James and definitely falls in that lineage," he offers before noting that the film also carves its own unique path thanks to Wan's collaborative approach. "I always felt like I was supported and trusted to do my thing with it, which I really appreciated." He continues to rave about the guidance Wan provided during the film's production. "James has so many great ideas, and he gets so excited by this," he says. "He loved this idea from the very beginning, and I would be a fool not to collaborate with him."

Wan is no stranger to Blumhouse, having been a collaborator with the studio for over a decade, and Turek says his presence has not wavered during that time. "James has been at this for so long, both in the horror trenches on an independent level and at the studio level with *Aquaman*," Turek offers, noting that this experience proved vital in his role as a mentor on *Night Swim*. "If we wound up hitting a production hurdle, he would think outside the box, and he would often come to the table with some fun lo-fi solutions to big problems." Turek refers to Wan as a "horror database," which proved useful when the production leaned on his experience and knowledge: "James made himself available to lend ideas and suggestions and helped Bryce fulfill his vision and sharpen the ideas that he had."

Wan's influence is also evident in the character dynamic that unfolds in *Night Swim*. "I wanted this to be a family story. If you invest in these characters and you care about them, the scares are going to hit harder," McGuire explains before praising Kerry Condon and Wyatt Russell, adding that Russell's athletic background played a role in his casting. "He has a former career as a professional hockey player, and that lines up with his character being a former professional baseball player," he explains. "He just got it immediately — that physicality is there, and he understands the psychology of someone trying to move on from a sport they've invested so much into."

Russell's experience and range within genre work didn't hurt either, McGuire notes. "I'm a huge fan of Wyatt. I loved his *Black Mirror* episode and *Under the Banner of Heaven*, and he loves going to that unhinged, frightening place." McGuire is also excited about Condon's contributions to *Night Swim*, praising her as an "incredible actor" with a tremendous screen presence and collaborator. "She always brought great ideas, and every time she's in a scene, she lights up the whole screen." This duo is the heart of the film, an approach that McGuire admits he owes to Wan. "I think James does a really good job of that. Whether that's the family in *Insidious* or the Warrens in *The Conjuring*, you're invested in that relationship, and that's definitely something that we have here, and it's really important to us."

THE FAMILY (AMÉLIE HOEFERLE, GAVIN WARREN, NANCY LENEHAN AND KERRY CONDON) IS SHOCKED TO DISCOVER VIA THEIR NEW POOL THAT DAD RAY (WYATT RUSSELL) IS A NEVER-NUDE.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES • BOTTOM RIGHT BY ANNE MARIE FOX

WRITER/DIRECTOR BRYCE MCGUIRE, EXCITED TO RUIN POOLS FOR A GENERATION OF HORROR FANS.

Turek also considers the character development to be crucial to *Night Swim*, and he describes the Wallers as a family that's seen better days. He feels that Ray's desire to return to his playing days is a particularly relatable tale of attempting to reclaim past glory, something Blumhouse horror has explored before. "In *Sinister*, Ethan Hawke's Ellison Oswalt is trying to recapture that fame that he had when he wrote his best-selling book, and now he's moving his family into a murder house," Turek explains. "Now, in *Night Swim*, you have a dad who has a different kind of dream. He wants to be a good father, but he also still wants to be a baseball player." According to Turek, Ray's desperation conflicts with Eve's desire to finally settle down and explore her own potential, creating more tension in the story. "Kerry worked closely with Bryce on fleshing Eve out," he reveals. "She's a mother who's been living under the shadow of her husband's dream, but she's got her own dream. And what Kerry does so well is sell the paranoia and curiosity once the pool's agenda starts to reveal itself."

Ultimately, it's that unique idea of a haunted pool that Turek finds to be so intriguing, and *Night Swim* is another opportunity to elevate new, original voices within the genre, something that's long been a priority at Blumhouse despite the studio's recent turn towards familiar titles like *Halloween* and *The Exorcist*. "That's what the company's always been about, long before I even got here," he insists.

"And *Night Swim* is back-to-the-basics Blumhouse when it comes to big concepts and high drama with a scary engine underneath, all while working on a modest budget to yield creativity." Most importantly, it's a movie with a fresh concept: as Turek points out, there have been some memorable pool scenes in horror films like *Cat People* and *Burnt Offerings*, but *Night Swim* is the first film of its kind. "I like when there's outside-the-box thinking," he raves. "We've seen a haunted car, and the *Amityville* series spun off with a series of cursed objects movies, but I've never seen a haunted pool." While we can't be sure someone isn't hatching an *Amityville* pool movie as we speak, let the record show that *Night Swim* won this particular horror heat.

Night Swim debuts in theaters on January 5th, in what McGuire and Turek affectionately refer to as "the *M3GAN* slot."

YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD POOL WRAITH OFFERS A HELPING HAND.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES • TOP LEFT BY ANNE MARIE FOX

Where the Devil Roams

The Adams Family moves forward by moving backward in their new Depression Era-set horror.

By Michael Gingold

There's nothing mysterious or spooky about the Adams Family when FANGORIA meets with them at Montreal's Fantasia International Film Festival, following the world premiere of their new feature *Where the Devil Roams*. Father John Adams, mother Toby Poser and daughters Zelda and Lulu are happy and bursting with enthusiasm for their latest project, and for the positive reception their work in the horror genre has brought them.

EVE (ZELDA ADAMS), COLLECTOR OF DOLL PARTS AND MURDEROUS IMAGERY.

FX ARTIST TREY LINDSAY AND ACTOR JAMES SULLIVAN RELAX BETWEEN BRUTAL TAKES.

The family shot their first feature, the road-trip drama *Rumblestrips*, in 2010, and several years later, as Zelda recalls, "I was around 12 and said, 'You know, I kind of want to kill a bunch of guys; that seems like it would be really fun! John, do you think I could do that in a movie?' And he was like, 'Hell yeah, I can make that happen!' So we ended up making this beautiful short feature [the hour-long *The Hatred*] that was our first venture into horror. It got into some festivals, and we realized that the horror community is so welcoming and wonderful. They really watched our film and were excited to see more. We were hooked, and decided we all needed to write another horror film together. That's how *The Deeper You Dig* was born."

The Deeper You Dig — about the paranormal aftermath of an accident in which a drunk driver played by John runs down a teenager played by Zelda — received an even warmer response on the festival circuit. It was followed by *Hellbender*, a striking and deeply moving study of a spellcasting rural family that was picked up by Shudder. Both movies revealed the Adamses as a filmmaking brood with unique imaginations and a strong command of DIY filmmaking craft, and *Where the Devil Roams* is their most ambitious production yet. It too began with Zelda — or specifically, her recurring dream.

"I was having nightmares that while I was sleeping, a clown would raise its head up by the side of the bed," she says. "My God, it was terrifying. But as I kept having that dream, I started thinking, wouldn't it be interesting if there was a clown that wasn't so messed up? Maybe the clown has a family, and isn't the antagonist of his story. So I brought this idea to my family of a family of clowns, and their lives traveling on the carnival circuit. We started tossing that concept around, and got the feeling that maybe we shouldn't do a clown story, because dressing up like that every time we filmed would end up being a lot of work."

Instead, *Where the Devil Roams*, written and directed by John, Toby, and Zelda, stars the trio as the Axon family, part of a low-rent Depression-era traveling circus. Eve (Zelda), who is otherwise mute, sings angelic hymns, and also serves as seamstress for fellow performer Mr. Tipps (Sam Rodd); his act involves him severing his own fingers, after which she sews them back on. Eve also photographs the brutal offstage crimes committed by her mother Maggie (Poser), while her father Seven (John), traumatized during WWI, blindfolds himself to avoid witnessing them. (Lulu has a smaller role as "Axe Girl.") It's the first time all three have played family on screen, though John notes that those relationships have been a theme in their genre movies from the beginning.

"*The Deeper You Dig* was about a certain slice of our life, while *Hellbender* dealt with a time when our Zelda was growing into a woman," he explains. "*Where the Devil Roams* is an exploration of heavier and darker ideas about family, concerning everyone's past and what kind of effect it has on the present and future. One of the beautiful things about horror is that you can talk about dark subjects that you wouldn't want to discuss out in the open. What I love about *Where the Devil Roams* is, we got to use a tone and a certain style and set it in an era that comes with a lot of weight to talk about hidden issues. In the case of Seven, it's what he did during the war and how it affects his love, how it affects his child, and in turn how they treat him."

"This is our most brutal, but also our most loving film," Poser adds. "It's about what this family endures, and how they support each other through these violent measures. I mean, this doctor who can't even look at blood anymore is married to a woman whose compulsion is toward shedding blood. And their child has grown up witnessing that, and turned it into art. I love opposites, and while this is very violent, there's so much love there, and one plays off the other beautifully."

The Depression-era setting also started with Zelda, and a project in which she composited herself into photos of Bonnie and Clyde and a car from the 1920s owned by John's father. "That period comes with a lot of baggage," Poser says, "and we knew it would be a good time to place these people who are sort of denizens of the dirt, and rootless. It really fed and informed the narrative of this family."

MAGGIE (TOBY POSER) HELPS ERIK JOHANNESSEN (HARALD SØRLIE) GET THE POINT.

> **This is our most brutal, but also our most loving film."**
>
> **- Toby Poser**

(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) MAGGIE (TOBY POSER) UNDERGOES DEPRESSION-ERA DENTISTRY, COURTESY OF SEVEN (JOHN ADAMS); CIRCUS CLOWNS, SPARE PARTS AND A MESSY DINNER PARTY; ZELDA ADAMS AND TOBY POSER LINE UP MR. TIPPS' (SAM RODD) CLOSING TRICK.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WONDER WHEEL PRODUCTIONS & YELLOW VEIL PICTURES

The Adamses crafted the sets for *Where the Devil Roams* themselves, shooting a good deal of the movie literally in their own expansive backyard. "Lulu and I had a great time building that stuff," John says. "We looked at old carny pictures and said, 'We can build this.' First we tried to create the front of the carnival stages, and very quickly, we realized that was out of our pay grade. But when we looked at the back of the sets, we realized they were so much more cinematic than the front, and that's what this movie is about anyway. It's about what happens behind the scenes, not so much on the stage." They decorated those sets, and costumed their characters, with items and clothing found at antique and second-hand stores they came across while driving through America on *Hellbender*'s festival tour.

On set, it was a true division of labor, and Lulu describes their collaborative process as "everyone taking turns. I've been gone a lot of the time at college, but even if I'm not there, it's the three of them absolutely splitting it up." Says John, "We've come to the realization that it's a lot easier and a lot more fun, and the film gets a lot better, if we just say, 'Do you want to run the show on this scene?' Toby will run it, or Zelda, or Lulu, and if that inspires you to have some ideas, you can be like, 'OK, can I run it now?' And then we take it all home to the editing bay."

"One important thing is, we all started in filmmaking together," Lulu continues. "Toby had done so much acting before, and Zelda and John had done some performing, but all of us began with the camerawork and figuring out the technical side at the same time. So it's not like only one person can be the cinematographer. It'll be, 'OK, it's your turn to do the sound,' and you don't have to explain it. 'All right, I've got the sound.' 'Cool, I've got the camera.' And the same thing with directing. We know how to talk to each other, so we can all take on those different roles and be equal."

"Having different ages, different genders and different viewpoints is also very helpful," John says. "Zelda's coming from a different place, and so is Lulu; we're all coming from different places regarding what we want to project. It's great to have everybody's viewpoint, and putting them all together is really fun."

HE'S ALIVE AND LOOKING FLY! THE CREATURE (COLE SPROUSE) GETS RE-ANIMATED BY LISA (KATHRYN NEWTON).

Fearless & Powerful: Diablo Cody Awakens Lisa

FRANKENSTEIN

The wicked mind behind JENNIFER'S BODY electrifies us all with her new twist on an old story.

By Mackenzie Bartlett

Dear Reader,

I was on the last leg of my '80s-themed party cruise when, for no logical reason, the navigational system of the ship failed and, by morning, we were floating off course toward the North Pole. While I was walking along the frigid deck enjoying a hot piña colada (don't ask), I noticed the crew busy on one side of the vessel, chatting with someone overboard. It was, in fact, Academy Award winner Diablo Cody (screenwriter of *Juno*, *Jennifer's Body*), who had drifted toward us in the night on a large fragment of ice. She gave some account of chasing after a large daemon on a sledge, but more importantly, sat down with me to discuss her new film, *Lisa Frankenstein*. What follows is a transcript of our conversation.

You have a knack for great titles. *Jennifer's Body* was a nod to the Hole song of the same name, and for anyone who ever owned a rainbow Trapper Keeper, the pun of *Lisa Frankenstein* won't be lost on them. What came first here, the chicken or the egg?

Well, I can tell you the story actually did come first, although I am very fond of the title. I had always wanted to toy with the Frankenstein legend and thought, 'Okay, we'll do an '80s girl name followed by Frankenstein.' You know, Stacy Frankenstein or Kelly Frankenstein. *Weird Science* was a major inspiration for me in writing this, and the creation in that movie is named Lisa. So I thought I would name the character Lisa as an homage to *Weird Science*, and then I was like, 'Lisa Frankenstein, I love that, that works!' Definitely Trapper Keeper vibes, but it was almost like a happy accident.

Frankenstein is kind of an It Girl right now. I feel like we're in this period where reimaginings of these classic monster stories are very in vogue and exciting for audiences. I'm wondering why you think that might be?

I have to tell you, it's not entirely a coincidence that it feels like Frankenstein is That Girl right now, because what initially spurred me to write this was that I had heard Universal was looking to do a new *Bride of Frankenstein*. I always loved that original film, and I thought, 'Maybe I could do it!' So I started brainstorming, and the seeds of *Lisa Frankenstein* were planted. I very quickly realized that it was something a little more indie and personal, so I didn't wind up pitching to Universal. It ultimately landed at Focus, so it's kind of under the same umbrella. I knew Frankenstein was sort of out there in the zeitgeist, and I was like, 'Well, all right, what's my take on that?' I think there's just a reason why these sorts of stories are eternal. Like Dracula, for instance, that slaps. It's great, we're never going to get tired of it, so why not?

ONE OF THE CLASSIC LOVE STORIES: VALLEY GIRL MEETS UNDEAD BOY.

You've referred to yourself as the "Emotional Cronenberg," because your work explores themes of people going through ugly emotional transformations. How does *Lisa Frankenstein* fit into that?

I have to say that we're maybe, at this point, crossing the Rubicon from Emotional Cronenberg into actual, literal Cronenberg-inspired cinema. There's an element of body horror there, and though it's comical, it's really important to the movie's core. The quote that inspired the story is something my therapist said to me. He said, 'The opposite of dismember is remember.' I don't even know what we were talking about, but I was like, 'Wait a minute.' In the process of remembering this dismembered man, Lisa is being allowed to feel grief for the first time in her life. It's essential to her emotional journey.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FOCUS FEATURES • BY MICHELE K. SHORT

What a line to be fed by your therapist!

I know, I was like, 'Wow, you definitely earned your $150.'

I keep thinking about your work and weird teenagers. Lisa Swallows (Kathryn Newton) in *Lisa Frankenstein* is obviously a weird teenager, and Mary Shelley, who lost her virginity in a graveyard and wrote *Frankenstein* at 18, was maybe, like, the prototypical weird teenager.

Yes, Shelley Hive, RISE UP! Mary Shelley, goth icon. The whole story of her being this unlikely runaway success as an author in that environment, in that culture, it seems appropriate to the kind of work I've always tried to do. Work that lends legitimacy to the emotions of teenage girls. I feel like she's a great muse for that reason.

Absolutely. A lot of your work centers around this relationship between teenage girls and the monstrous. What is it about that intersection that excites you? What makes girlhood so primed for horror?

I just remember my own adolescence as being a violent time, emotionally speaking. You begin to bleed, your body is transforming, you're feeling all these incredibly enhanced emotions. I think next I need to write, like, the perimenopause horror movie, because I'm experiencing that currently. I just think, in general, the things that women go through physically are really gnarly. To me, the relationship between femininity and horror has always just kind of been there.

Frankenstein is widely regarded as the first ever science fiction novel, and Mary Shelley originally published it anonymously. Women aren't new to the genre space, and, in fact, they're often pioneers, but they get referred to as just being 'ahead of their time.' I think that you've seen this dynamic firsthand with the cult reclamation of *Jennifer's Body* –

It's so frustrating.

Sure is! Do you think the tide has changed? What is your perspective on that?

Well, I'm incredibly grateful for it. Honestly, one of the most healing experiences of my life is seeing people connect with *Jennifer's Body* now, because that was a really rough time for me. The movie was both critically and commercially a disaster. It was just bad all around. There were no *Jennifer's Body* Apologists at that time. Watching audiences gradually discover the movie culminating in this cult success that we've had the last couple years, it's so amazing, but it's bittersweet. I'm so grateful for it, and at the same time, I'm like, 'Why couldn't it have happened then?' Sometimes it takes the culture some time to catch up. It's always been easier for people to dismiss women, especially in genre spaces, where traditionally men's voices have dominated. The guys back then wanted to see something that *Jennifer's Body* wasn't. You see Megan Fox on the poster, being totally sexualized in all the marketing materials, and you think that's what's coming out, and that's not what it was.

It feels appropriate to be interviewing you now for FANGORIA, because my first introduction to the magazine was actually the *Jennifer's Body* cover, where she's very much not sexy, and really gnarly and gross.

Oh, that cover made me so happy.

You've already mentioned *Weird Science* – what were some other influences for you while writing *Lisa Frankenstein*?

This isn't really your traditional horror movie. It's more like a paranormal love story, so my influences were things like *Beetlejuice*, *Edward Scissorhands*, *Night of the Comet*. I'm an '80s baby; the '80s, for me, are unopposed. They're in my DNA. And I just thought, 'I want to put something like that out there, in theaters. I want people to laugh.' I think it captures the simpler vibe of that time.

GAG ME WITH A SPOON! CAN YOU WIPE OFF YOUR... EVERYTHING... BEFORE CRASHING AT MY PAD?

"I JUST REMEMBER MY OWN ADOLESCENCE AS BEING A VIOLENT TIME, EMOTIONALLY SPEAKING. YOU BEGIN TO BLEED, YOUR BODY IS TRANSFORMING, YOU'RE FEELING ALL THESE INCREDIBLY ENHANCED EMOTIONS." -DIABLO CODY

I think people are really excited to see you return in some capacity to the horror scene. In a perfect world, no holds barred, what is a horror sub-genre that you'd love to tackle?

I'm currently working on a script, and I don't know if it will ever see the light of day, but it is true body horror. It's very violent, it's very disturbing. Typically, I manage to layer some comedy into everything that I do. In this case, I would say I do not. I know I'm not the first person to milk this trend for horror movie purposes, but I'm really fascinated with the alterations people are making to their bodies these days, and how normalized this kind of plastic ghoul look has become in our culture. And I say that without judgment. It's fascinating to me, because I don't think people realize how violent some of these procedures are, they only see the results. So that's something that I've been writing about.

DIRECTOR ZELDA WILLIAMS GETS PRECISE ABOUT HER DIMENSIONS ON THE SET OF *LISA FRANKENSTEIN*.

> "MY INFLUENCES WERE THINGS LIKE *BEETLEJUICE*, *EDWARD SCISSORHANDS*, *NIGHT OF THE COMET*. I'M AN '80S BABY; THE '80S, FOR ME, ARE UNOPPOSED."
>
> -DIABLO CODY

Okay, switching gears a bit. The bubblegum '80s nostalgia of *Lisa Frankenstein* has me pining for the bygone era of teen magazines. So I'd like to ask you a few rapid-fire questions from the non-existent FANGORIA offshoot gossip tabloid: Cosmo Ghoul.

Okay, love it.

Lisa Swallows: What must-have accessories are in her purse?

Well, she has a gigantic contraceptive sponge because she's hoping to lose her virginity. She absolutely has Kissing Koolers, which was this oily lip balm that we used to wear back in the day. Obviously you need your lips to taste like bubblegum just in case somebody wants to kiss them. And, aerosol hairspray, Max Hold. Gotta have it.

What's her karaoke song?

"Can't Fight This Feeling" by REO Speedwagon.

Brilliant. And what is her favorite scary movie?

The Gate. I'm throwing it way back here.

Mary Shelley famously wrote *Frankenstein* on a dare, by candlelight, on a dark and stormy night. What is your ideal writing environment?

This is probably scarier than anything you could think of: My ideal writing environment is a food court at the mall. I know that's weird. The ambient noise of a food court has always lulled me into a creative flow state. I've been doing it for years. It's not cool, but it is effective.

That is very chic. Do you have a go-to snack while you're there?

Again, not cool, but I love a Chipotle. I love having Chipotle access. Sometimes if I'm feeling virtuous, perhaps a green smoothie, but, you know, usually a hot chicken.

In the spirit of throwing it back, many moons ago, you were slated to host a talk show called *Me Time With Diablo Cody*.

Oh man, that makes me so sad because that was going to be the weirdest talk show of all time. We shot one episode and it did not test well.

Justice for that. Talk about test audiences being wrong.

Always. I have had some very shitty test screenings in my time, let me tell you. I have been focused-grouped into a state of absolute humility. I still have a card from a test screening of *Jennifer's Body* where the kid just wrote 'needs more boobs.' That was his critique.

And that boy went on to become a U.S Senator.

He probably did!

But let's say we're in a twilight zone reality, and *Me Time With Diablo Cody* is on the air. If you could reanimate a deceased celebrity to be a guest, who would it be?

This is the easiest question in the world. I'm reanimating Patrick Swayze. He's my favorite actor of all time. I miss him. If he's back from the dead, I'm immediately asking him to do my dream project, which can never happen for obvious reasons. I want to see Patrick Swayze and John Travolta in a dance film together.

...We were robbed.

We were so completely robbed of this.

Life is so unfair.

I know it is. So that's my first thing I'm going to do. I'm going to be like, 'Look, Patrick, I have John Travolta backstage, I'm bringing him out and I'm going to broker this deal right now.'

Well, thank you Diablo. We've come to the end of my questions. I'd like to go on the record as saying: RIP Mary Shelley. I think you would have loved *Jennifer's Body* and *Lisa Frankenstein*.

God, I hope so. 💀

LOOKS LIKE THE CREATURE HAS BEEN "FOLLOWING WOMEN AFTER DARK."

SMALL-TOWN POLITICS GET BLOODY IN ERIK BLOOMQUIST'S SLASHER COMEDY

FOUNDERS DAY

BY BRETT GALLMAN

During the past fifty years, the slasher movie canon has carved up every major holiday, drenching New Year's Day, Christmas, and everything in between in a gory heap of blood and guts. However, Connecticut-based filmmakers Carson and Erik Bloomquist consider this and the long history of the genre to be a challenge, one they've met by creating their own blood-stained festivities in *Founders Day*, a frenzy of murder and mayhem in a small New England town, where someone has taken their love of cutthroat politics one step too far.

Tensions are running high in Fairwood on the eve of both a tricentennial celebration and a mayoral election that feel like a microcosm of American politics. Mud-slinging and petty squabbling abound between incumbent candidate Blair Gladwell (Amy Hargreaves) and challenger Harold Faulkner (Jayce Bartok), entangling the community at large. Both candidates' children are caught in the crosshairs, further complicating their already dramatic lives, at least by high school standards—and then a masked maniac arrives on the scene to make matters even worse. When the first victim is Melissa Faulkner (Olivia Nikkanen), the election becomes even more heated, as each side accuses the other of exploiting the tragedy for political gain — not that there will be anyone left to vote if the bloodthirsty Founder has anything to say about it.

"PLEASE DON'T KILL ME, MR. FOUNDER. I WANNA BE IN THE SEQUEL!" - LILLY (EMILIA MCCARTHY), PROBABLY.

While the Bloomquists rose to prominence with *Ten Minutes to Midnight* in 2020, the brothers have been filmmakers for over a decade. In fact, they thought *Founders Day* would be among the first films they produced, a notion Erik attributes to naivety. "I thought it would be the easiest film to do, so we'd do it early in our career," he explains. "But it didn't turn out that way, and this idea stuck around for years until we finally went to work on it." Now, *Founders Day* is an act of closure for the Bloomquists at this stage of their careers. "It feels like the end of a chapter," Carson muses, noting that its release is a full-circle moment due to their love of *Scream*. The brothers have frequently cited Wes Craven's seminal slasher as a formative influence on their work, and it's no surprise that its fingerprints are all over *Founders Day*.

The Bloomquists were careful in their reverence, though, because they didn't want *Founders Day* to be yet another hyper-aware homage. Instead, the duo keyed in on recapturing the primal thrills lurking within *Scream* and its contemporaries. "We wanted to capture the feeling of that era as opposed to simply repeating its beats," Carson says. "We especially like the sense of mischief, paranoia, and fun," something that's evident in the film's rollicking twists and turns. During our interview, the two frequently delight in the story's surprising structure, which feels like the latest salvo in a long-running line of gamesmanship among slasher filmmakers. With the genre being fully deconstructed and reconstructed during the past 25 years, the Bloomquists embraced the expectations. "It's really hard to do a big reveal that actually surprises everyone now," Erik admits. "Because you can technically guess anybody, and speculation is so pervasive now, so we wondered what it would look like with a new reveal every 20 minutes for the back half of the movie."

However, it was important for the plot's shocks to feel organic and reverberate through Fairwood's citizens, another element they wanted to recapture from *Scream*. "We wanted to explore community in a way that resonated, and see the intricacies of how a disturbance can have a major impact across the town," Carson says. Erik chimes in here, noting that this was also a critical part of authentically capturing a close-knit small-town life, where everyone shares a deep, lived-in sense of history and community. "Everybody either knows each other or knows of each other and has an opinion about each other, so we really wanted to establish that there are relationships and judgments that everybody's casting," he says. "Even if you don't see scenes that might take place in between other scenes, they exist outside of the frame. If you were to pivot in another direction, you could follow any character and it would be interesting with this ensemble."

The Bloomquists especially take pride in this aspect of their films. "This has the largest and purest ensemble of all our projects, and it hinges on the ensemble working together so well, and everybody having a specificity to

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ERIK BLOOMQUIST • BY DAVID APUZZO

them, creating a curiosity to see where each person's storyline goes," Carson asserts. The most familiar face in the cast is William Russ, an actor beloved by the generation raised on *Boy Meets World*. The Bloomquists are very much among that crowd, referring to him as the "coolest, most real TV sitcom dad," and it was that familiar presence that inspired the duo to cast Russ as Mr. Jackson, a teacher and elder statesman in Fairwood. "Most of our audience will immediately have a feel for that character that's the same one you have with your favorite teacher," Erik raves. "There's an immediate camaraderie when he enters the screen."

That cozy familiarity was an imperative for *Founders Day*, as the Bloomquists embraced and celebrated their New England roots by painting an idyllic, Rockwellian backdrop for their carnage, putting them in the colorful tradition of regional slashers. According to Erik, the project began life as a "love letter to autumn and small-town history," and shooting in their native Connecticut added another layer of authenticity to the film's wispy nostalgia, creating an indelible atmosphere. "We were lucky to shoot it at the end of autumn," Erik recalls before Carson muses about the setting's appeal. "There's something I love about that pocket of the year because there's a warmth and wistfulness in the afterglow of Halloween," he posits before illuminating the duo's approach to weaving this wistfulness into a modern setting, citing *Hocus Pocus* as an inspiration. "There's a nostalgic longing that's very evocative in a small town in autumn that allowed us to capture this, because we didn't want to make a period piece," he continues. "But we did want to feel that sense of nostalgia and history."

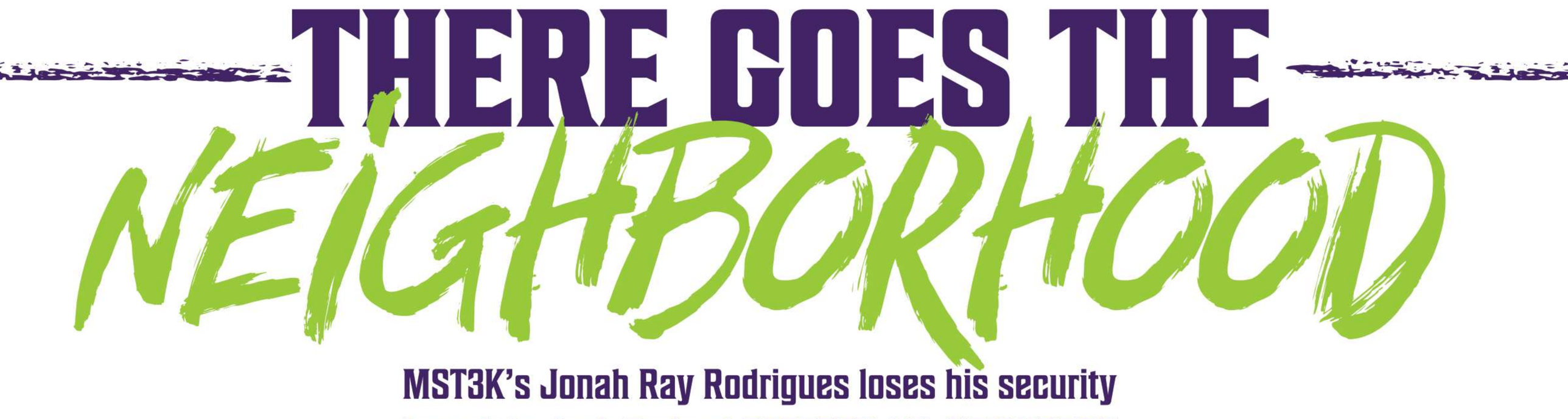
Of course, no slasher is complete without a distinctive killer, and the Bloomquists were excited to tackle what proved to be a daunting task. "We spent a lot of time talking about this — just like it's really hard to create a good twist, it's hard to make an iconic killer," Erik explains before Carson clarifies: "We wanted it to feel iconic, but also not gimmicky, and that's exceedingly hard." They collaborated with effects legend Tony Gardner to help bring their vision of a deranged Founding Father to the screen. According to Carson, the duo "really wanted to put a stamp on it and there's a specificity in the design, especially with the color red, that makes sense with the story — it's a sharp blood color, but it's also a patriotic red" applied to a tragicomedy mask typically found in political theater. To pronounce judgment, The Founder wields a gavel outfitted with a switchblade that the Bloomquists are eager to discuss. "A gavel makes sense for a judge, but we needed a knife," Erik says. "But we don't want to just do the normal knife, so we turned to John Lauterbach, an amazing props SFX guy, who fabricated it." And yes, the brothers still have the switchblade gavel in their possession, something Erik is positively giddy to reveal as he asks Carson to fetch it from another room, a demented exchange of brotherly love that could only exist in the wild, wonderful world of slashers. 💀

POLICE COMMISSIONER PETERSON (CATHERINE CURTIN) MIGHT UPHOLD THE LAW, BUT THE FOUNDER PASSES JUDGMENT ON ALL.

By Sean Abley

THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

MST3K's Jonah Ray Rodrigues loses his security deposit in Josh Forbes' DESTROY ALL NEIGHBORS.



WILLIAM (JONAH RAY RODRIGUES) EMBARKS ON THE FILM'S TITLE ENDEAVOR— STARTING WITH VLAD (ALEX WINTER, OPPOSITE PAGE).

When Fango arrives at the set of Shudder exclusive *Destroy All Neighbors*, we're offered a seat in video village as cameras roll on star/producer Jonah Ray Rodrigues and *Reno 911!*'s Thomas Lennon arguing in a recording studio. Quietly observing the action on the monitor is a scruffy, older man who appears to be part of the crew. The director, Josh Forbes, calls "Cut!" and the gentleman leans over and asks, "You're FANGORIA, right?" His voice is oddly discordant with his perceived age and appearance. "I'm Alex."

And just like that, we're talking with Alex Winter, *Destroy All Neighbors*' producer and on-screen antagonist. Winter, who got mainstream famous with *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*, and FANGORIA famous with the criminally neglected *Freaked*, is under a mountain of latex to play Vlad, the first neighbor to suffer the titular fate of the film. Winter's neck-up transformation is so realistic the work stands up to scrutiny in broad daylight from inches away, which makes speaking with him quite disorienting for the bulk of our set visit. Before delving into the history of the project, Winter quickly jumps in to discuss the elephant in the room, i.e., his head and his decades-long love of the art of makeup effects.

"When I was really little, I got into Dick Smith and started doing applications on myself when I was pretty young," explains the actor. Winter's love of the art has followed him throughout his career, starting with small appliances for *Lost Boys*, playing his own grandmother in *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey*, becoming half-man, half-freak Ricky Coogan in *Freaked*, and most recently in a full-body prison muscle suit for *Bill & Ted Face the Music*.

Largely focused on directing features and documentaries in the years since the studio abandoned *Freaked*, Winter is choosy about acting roles. But *Destroy All Monsters* had a certain appeal. "I've mostly been directing for 30 years... I write series, and that's all been

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DESTROY ALL NEIGHBORS LLC

going incredibly well for a very long time. So, I don't have a need to act for money," Winter offers. "It's gotta be something I really want to do." And while many actors would find practical effects makeup to be a chore, the fact that he would be required to spend endless hours covered in foam latex was actually a checkmark in the "plus" column for Winter. "I'll tell you, when Jonah came to me with [*Destroy All Neighbors*], the idea of coming off *Bill & Ted Face the Music* and working in the prosthetics again, being able to do something that was just balls to the wall, like fucking edgy comedy, edgy horror with really smart, intelligent people who had taste — that was just too good to pass up."

Destroy All Neighbors lives up to the title, with the neighbors in question being destroyed by sweet musician William (*MST3K*'s Rodrigues), a prog-rock enthusiast on an unending quest to finish his album. Enduring a dead-end job at a recording studio and fighting his own self-inflicted roadblocks, William is finally pushed to the brink by a new addition to the apartment building — Vlad. The trance music-loving gentleman-of-a-certain-age torments William with a joy for life that includes an unending barrage of music played at "11." Vlad meets his demise at the hands of William in an extended, violent, slapstick set piece, then sticks around to provide many of the laughs for the duration of this brutal horror comedy.

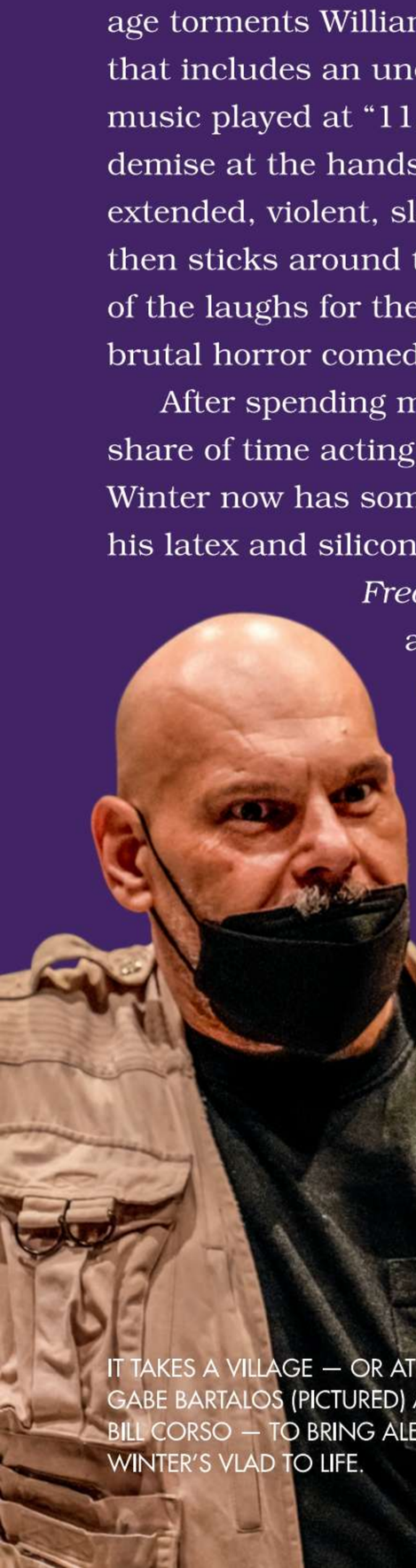
After spending more than his fair share of time acting through foam, Winter now has some "must haves" for his latex and silicone adventures. "On *Freaked*, I literally had a rig jammed into my mouth to keep my mouth open that ripped a hole through my gums, receded my gums back from my teeth, like a 90-year-old," recalls the actor of the appliance that he also slept in for multiple shoot days. "So, I was like, let's not do that again. You know, shy of that, I just need to have a certain level of expression through the prosthetics. I don't want to be so buried in something that I can't act through it."

LIKE DR. FRANKENSTEIN, DIRECTOR JOSH FORBES RECOILS IN HORROR AT HIS UNHOLY CREATION.

Vlad's death is the beginning of an unending parade of blood-soaked "Did I do that?" shenanigans that bedevil William, who just wants to get into his music, man. But the person truly responsible for the comic carnage is special makeup effects legend Gabe Bartalos, who excitedly offers himself up for an interview when he discovers Fango is on set. Bartalos explains he was drawn to *Destroy All Neighbors*' "playground of characters," and indeed, as each tenant bites the dust, he transforms them into oddly lovable crime scene cutups.

Keenly aware of a performer's needs after decades of transforming actors into creatures, Bartalos explains the process of navigating design versus function. "We did a head cast, arm cast, upper body cast of Alex. And really, the first step was me designing Vlad." During the months of preproduction, Bartalos chipped away at the design of the film's delightfully murderable character.

"It's really interesting because you play with the weight, you play with the dimensions, and there was a moment where suddenly I was like, this is it. I got Vlad!"



IT TAKES A VILLAGE — OR AT LEAST GABE BARTALOS (PICTURED) AND BILL CORSO — TO BRING ALEX WINTER'S VLAD TO LIFE.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DESTROY ALL NEIGHBORS LLC • TOP & BOTTOM LEFT BY SCOTT EVERETT WHITE

VLAD (ALEX WINTER) GOES ON A JOURNEY IN *DESTROY ALL NEIGHBORS*.

“Being able to do something that was just balls to the wall... with really smart people who had taste — that was just too good to pass up.” - Alex Winter

The next step was to ensure Winter could make his way through the foam to bring Vlad to life. “We went through the process of designing how the makeup comes apart, how the prosthetics will most serve Alex as a performer so he can emote and still perform,” explains Bartalos. “And that's really fun because you engineer how you segment all the pieces.”

And indeed, Winter’s expressions come through even as we sit for this interview. “I made sure that they were built in a way that I would have mobility through the foam. Both Gabe and Bill Corso have done an amazing job,” enthuses Winter.

The workload on the film’s relatively short shoot schedule afforded Bartalos and on-set application artist Corso (who also worked as key makeup artist on *Freaked*) a rare chance to view all their work *in totum*. “There have been days where every character is playing, and there's a makeup effect happening, and there's a specialty head for a camera rig, and I'm just looking around with pretty big smile on my face,” Bartalos says, with that same big grin. “Like, yeah, this is good.’”

After years in development (including a pandemic break), many hands have hefted *Destroy All Neighbors* across the finish line. But the journey began with random kitchen table conversations between director Forbes and original screenwriter Charles A. Pieper. Forbes graciously chats with Fango as he’s eating his lunch (precious time on a film set), laying out the journey from casual convos to Shudder streaming. Most importantly, he reveals not only has he been involved with the project from the beginning, he’s lived William’s pain. “My friend Charlie and I, we were swapping bad neighbor stories,” recalls Forbes. “I had a neighbor who lived next door who, when we had our first child, would bang on the wall and scream that he was gonna kill our kid. Like, just scary stuff.” The problematic neighbor tormented Forbes and his family to the point the director would “...just lay in bed thinking about all the horrible things I'd want to do to this person,” he says with a laugh. “I'm like, ‘I'm just gonna murder him. I'm just gonna sneak into his house, and I'm just gonna kill this guy...’” Forbes is quick to add, “...which I did not do.”

Pieper shared his own stories of a nightmare neighbor with the director. “And so, we started going back and forth about it, and I was like... there's gotta be a movie in there somewhere of this guy, you know? And then it started germinating.” Soon, Forbes’ and Pieper’s personal musings on seemingly justified murder gelled into what would become *Destroy All Neighbors*... with one crucial tweak to the plot. “When [William] goes to [kill Vlad], he decides against it. But then the death happens anyway. And then chaos ensues.”

The guts and gore are plentiful, and before Fango leaves the set, we’re treated to one last dollop of Bartalos’ grue: we pass the crew in the parking lot setting up an insert shot of a certain character who has a “face vs. car tire” encounter. “Josh encouraged me to take a cartoon approach,” Bartalos explains of the specific appliance, which is indeed cartoonish in execution. When asked about working with Forbes, he offers, “There's this really interesting ‘push me, pull

The movie's a jumble of everything I love: Sam Raimi, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, the Coen Brothers, Brian De Palma, Frank Henenlotter."

- Josh Forbes

me' going on where Josh comes from a flavor of almost *Beetlejuice* and bubblegum, and he rejoices in that. Yet he wanted the grit and the tenacity that seems to be in my DNA, maybe from the East Coast roughness, let's say, that darker EC comic [tone]."

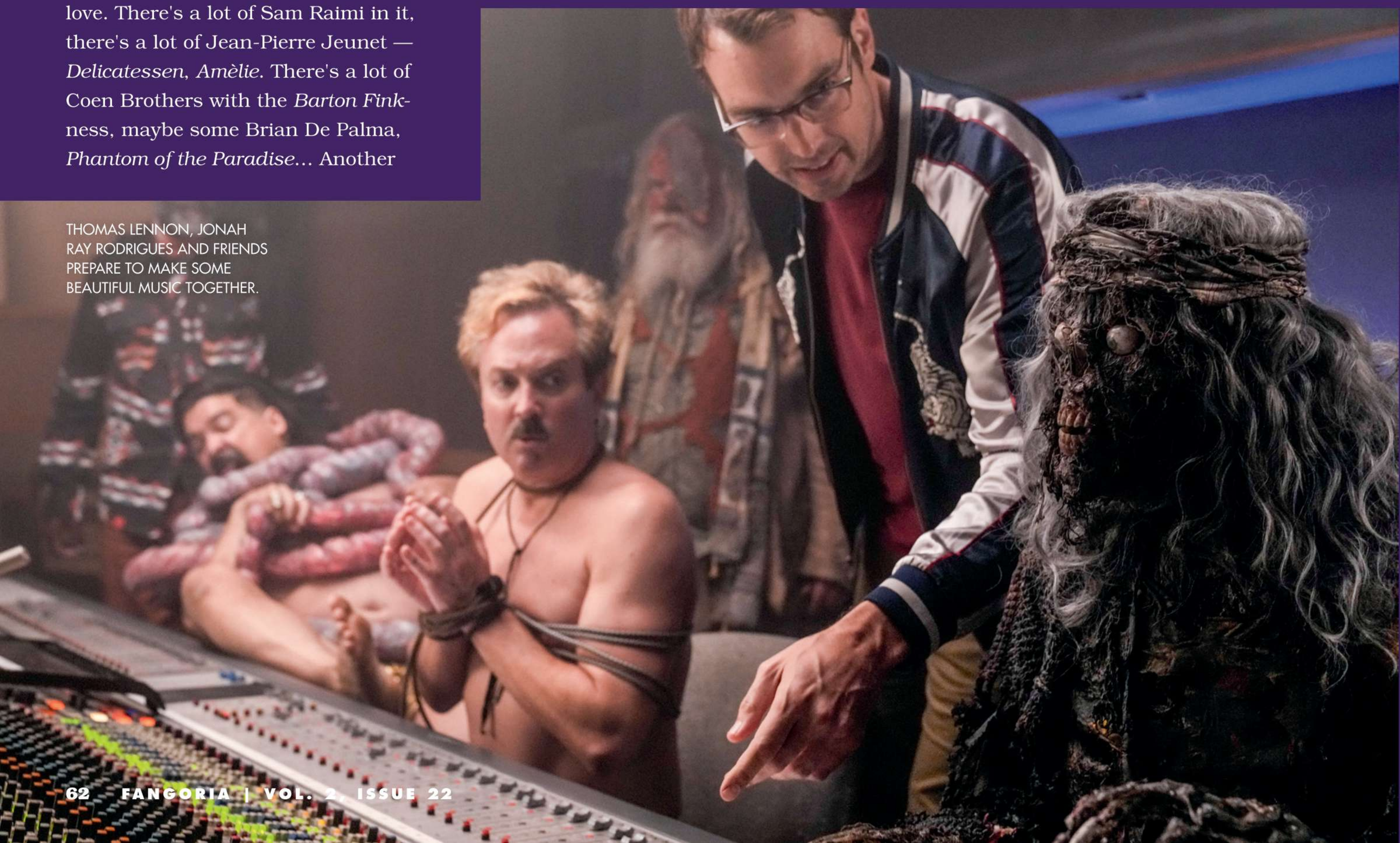
Forbes confirms Bartalos' assessment with his own comedy bona fides. "I watched a lot of classic comedy as a kid, like a ton of Marx Brothers. The Three Stooges is a huge influence, obviously, like all the violence and slap sick stuff. I was a Charlie Chaplin guy." As far as feature film influences, Forbes draws from some of the greats. "The movie's a jumble of everything that I love. There's a lot of Sam Raimi in it, there's a lot of Jean-Pierre Jeunet — *Delicatessen*, *Amèlie*. There's a lot of Coen Brothers with the *Barton Fink*-ness, maybe some Brian De Palma, *Phantom of the Paradise*... Another influence is Frank Henenlotter." And on the nerdier side, "I mean, *Benny & Joon* defined who I was in high school, as cheesy as that is. I was like, 'Oh, I want to be that guy that's into these weird old movies and into clowning and like juggling and stuff...'"

Also drawn from Forbes' personal experience is William's struggle with neurodivergence. "This movie is very much about having ADHD, honestly," Forbes reveals. "That's something that Jonah and I have bonded about. We both have ADHD and that feeling of having these big dreams, wanting to do something, and not being able to get it together and letting people down and forgetting things, I mean, it's a very personal movie. It's almost embarrassingly so," he laughs.

In a truly clever move, Forbes and the screenwriters (Mike Benner and Jared Logan are credited alongside Pieper) have tied ADHD to another important piece of the *Destroy All Neighbors* puzzle — the music. To Forbes' mind, William's musical genre obsession (prog-rock) is "...like, the most ADHD music, where it's just like, oh! Every idea you want? We're just gonna put it in... a glockenspiel and a trumpet and whatever." According to Forbes, one of Pieper's favorite musical acts is the alt-rock band Man Man, so casting the band's frontman, Ryan Kattner, as the dickish singer Caleb Bang Jansen who torments William, was a no-brainer. Bonus content: Kattner also scores the film, his work standing in for William's *'prog' de ré·sis·tance*.

What becomes crystal clear as Fango speaks to the various folks involved in *Destroy All Neighbors* is goodwill radiates off every aspect of production. Most of the folks involved committed long before financing was in place, and the enthusiasm on set is contagious. "The DNA of this is all really good," explains Bartalos. "And I'll credit a lot of that to Josh. It trickles down from the top. Josh was clear about his passion for horror films and what he wants to do with it, and that's the kind of [leader] you want. Someone who's not begrudging the gig, or it's a leapfrog to something else. Someone who's pumped about the moment."

Rocking and rolling like an amped up, farcical, modern-day take on *The Tell-Tale Heart*, once the film's elements coalesce — performances, direction, script, music, and gore — *Destroy All Neighbors* propels the audience toward a blistering climax featuring Kattner's all-too-perfect prog experience. Come for the destroying of neighbors; stay for the shredding of your earballs. 💀



THOMAS LENNON, JONAH RAY RODRIGUES AND FRIENDS PREPARE TO MAKE SOME BEAUTIFUL MUSIC TOGETHER.

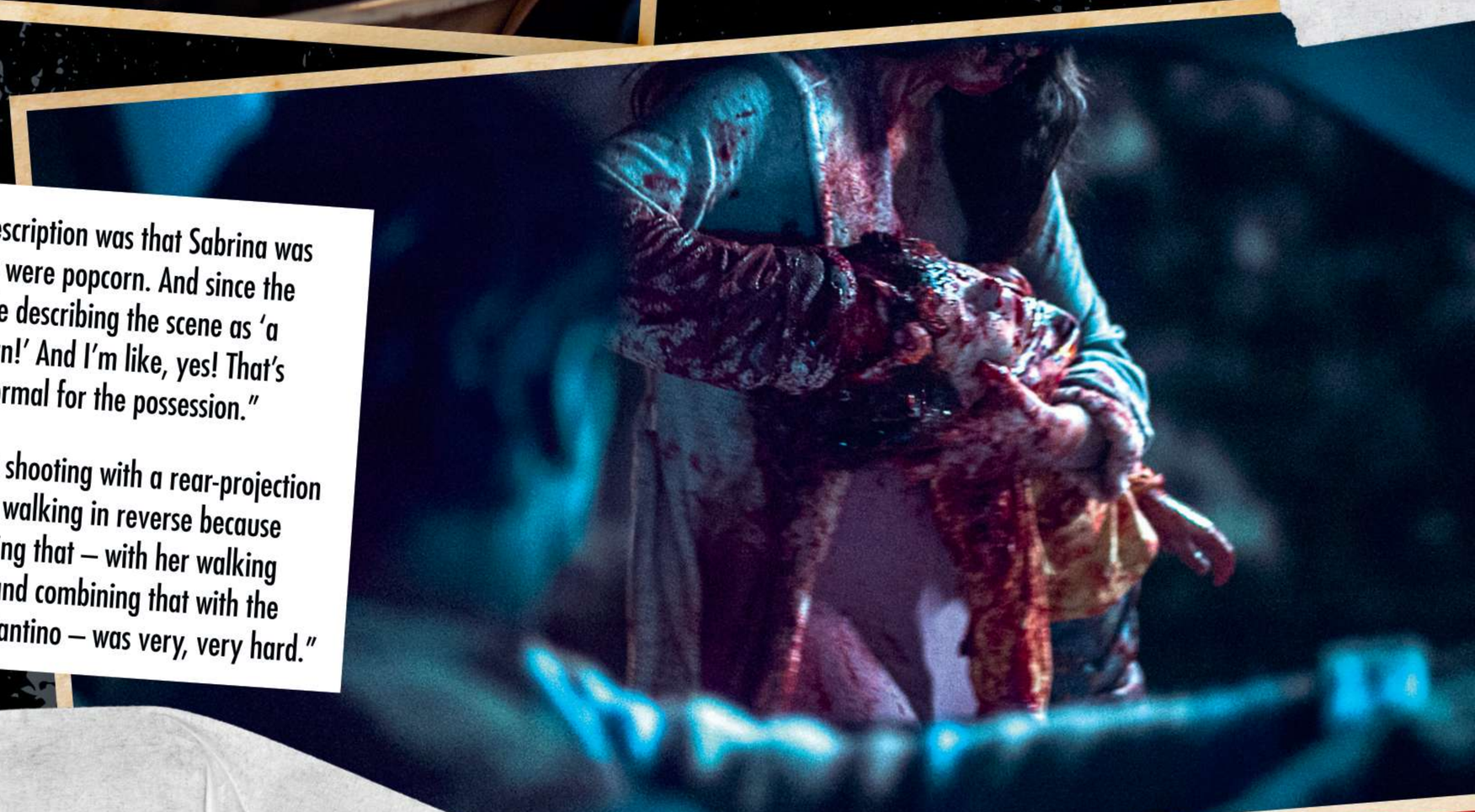
PHOTO COURTESY OF DESTROY ALL NEIGHBORS LLC • BY SCOTT EVERETT WHITE

WHEN EVIL LURKS

BY SCOTT WAMPLER

Demián Rugna's *When Evil Lurks* was one of 2023's absolute best horror movies, a no-punches-pulled nightmare that redefined what a "possession movie" can be. We were so delighted by the film's gnarly effects (of which there are many!) that we simply had to sit down with Rugna and find out everything we could about how his hellish vision came together. Here, edited for length and clarity, are his memories from the making of *When Evil Lurks*.

"Obviously, this is a puppet - not a real kid. We tried to hide this puppet from the kids on set, but on the last day of shooting I saw the actual little boy with the puppet in his hands, just looking at himself. He was playing around with it, laughing! I have a photo somewhere of me drinking maté out of [the puppet's] head."



"It's funny: when I wrote this scene, the description was that Sabrina was eating [her son] Santino's brains as if they were popcorn. And since the movie came out, I have seen several people describing the scene as 'a mother eating her child's brains like popcorn!' And I'm like, yes! That's what I wrote! She has the hunger, that is normal for the possession."

"Also, this scene was very difficult. We were shooting with a rear-projection screen, but we first needed to shoot Sabrina walking in reverse because the background was moving differently. Timing that – with her walking backwards, against the footage behind her, and combining that with the footage of her eating the guts and brain of Santino – was very, very hard."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF IFC FILMS

"Uriel, the Rotten. We made his entire body as a puppet. There's not actually a guy inside there. We had a casting call for fat guys, but I was not looking for simply fat, I wanted extra, extra fat. We didn't find it. We instead found a little fat guy, and our makeup artist took a mold and then added more fat. He took a picture of this mold and sent it to me and I said, 'No, no. More fat. More, more, more fat!"

"At some points you see [Uriel] talking, or moving. So at the end of the 10 days we called the original model and said, 'OK, you must act now!' Then we shot his head, particularly his mouth and eyes, separately, and then composited that onto the footage we'd shot of the puppet. Now it looks like he's moving!"

"The decision was made to use a puppet because we would have needed [an actor] in makeup all the time for about 10 days. 10 days in that kind of makeup is a lot of time. We did the same thing on *Terrified* with the dead little boy. Keeping all that makeup on a kid for so long would have been a disaster!"

"Here we have actress Virginia Garófalo, on the night we crashed the car into the tree. Marcos Huerta was the guy who did all our makeup and made the monsters – he's a very good artist – and he made this prosthetic addition to Virginia's face. It had a six-hour application process, but she was in good spirits about it that night. Her energy on set was amazing. She was running around [in the makeup] saying, 'I love this, I love this!'"

"This was the first scene we shot with Emilio Vodanovich, of the 15 days or so we had with him. And of course the first scene we shoot with him is this disgusting [puking blood] scene. It wasn't disgusting for him, but for the crew. They were about to vomit, as well! They came to me and said, 'What are you doing?! Stop now!' I love how disgusted they were by this."

"Hmm, we didn't cut Ruiz's throat, so I think he's just getting shaved here? We destroyed his head, yes, but his throat was okay. Here they are either shaving him or applying makeup for that, preparing him to die."

"For the shot where Ruiz's wife hits herself with the axe, we used a rubber axe, with the blood and wounds added in digitally after the fact."

"Yes, the goat scene. I am okay with this scene now because everyone loves it – it has a lot of power! – but in the beginning, I hated it because I had only one day to shoot the entire sequence. We had the goat owner pushing the goat [towards the farmer] and had to erase him from the footage, the sun kept changing position and that was affecting the goats, the goats sometimes ran away from us … I look at this sequence now and I can see little mistakes, but the response from audiences has been so strong that I now love it."

"[VFX artist] Andrés Borghi did a very good job with this. The puppet didn't work as intended, so we had to add separate footage of the actor's real eyes and some blood. So in the film, it's a mixture of practical and digital."

"This was the same day we shot the goats, actually. After a couple of shots with them, the goats' owner realized that the goats don't trust us, that's why they keep trying to run away. So he came and told us, 'The goats are not behaving because they suspect something is going to happen. Could you go do something else while we wait for them to calm down?' So, that's when we shot the head of Ruiz."

SOMETIMES *The Rich* EAT YOU

FORGET ZOMBIES—THE HORROR MOVIE MONSTER DU JOUR IS THE ONE-PERCENTER

BY TRAVIS JOHNSON

It's hardly coloring outside the lines to observe that the anxieties of the age are reflected in our pop culture, and often before orthodox sociology even notices a trend. The horror genre is perhaps the most easily readable barometer for this sort of thing. Here in our little genre, we're already dealing with monsters and madmen, and such villains often stand in for more nebulous, less tangible threats.

George Romero left the screen strewn with entrails in 1978's *Dawn of the Dead*, but he was really pithing the viscera of the mindless consumer culture he saw all around him, his lumbering mall zombies not too dissimilar to their breathing real-world counterparts. The torture porn/survival horror craze inaugurated by the success of Eli Roth's *Cabin Fever* and, especially, *Hostel* drew scorn from scandalized pundits who simply couldn't believe the sheer cruelty now on display in the multiplexes, nor imagine what kind of depraved fiend might enjoy watching it.

For his part, Roth always averred that a generation coming of age with the horrors of the invasion of Iraq and the Global War on Terror on the nightly news wouldn't bat an eyelid at milder gore, noting that his films were "very much a reflection of my disgust with the Iraq War and the Al-Qaeda beheadings." And judging by the slew of similarly sadistic flicks that came along in the early 2000s, audiences were responding.

Horror's handy like that. More than any other genre, it directly addresses our collective fears, perhaps because the evocation of fear is the central aim. Its metaphors are more transparent, and its message clearer: it tells us what we're afraid of, and it tells us who the monsters are.

And right now, that's the rich.

It's not exactly a new idea. For one thing, aristocratic vampires have been battening on the necks of peasants for ages, and you can't get a more obvious allegory than that. But currently, the most obvious trend in horror is the evil rich villain. In the horror cinema of the 2020s, you're much more likely to be run to the ground by a coven of bloodthirsty nepo babies than a pack of werewolves.

"It seems like, as a society, we're becoming increasingly disgusted by the uber-wealthy. There's an element of wish fulfillment in seeing evil billionaires brought low." - Guy Busick

Released in 2019, *Ready or Not* is a textbook example, wherein new bride Samara Weaving battles her old money in-laws as they try to sacrifice her to the family's patron demon – the source of their wealth – on her wedding night. Its class themes are explicit: Weaving's Grace was raised in foster care, and even the most sympathetic of the villainous Le Domas clan, Adam Brody's conflicted Daniel, is ineffectual

PHOTO (BELOW) COURTESY OF SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES • PHOTO (FACING) COURTESY OF WILD STREET PICTURES

WELCOME TO THE FAMILY: THE RICH ASSHOLES OF *READY OR NOT*. FACING PAGE: *SOCIETY*'S "SHUNTING" GETS UNDERWAY.

at best, while the rest are just plain evil, more than happy to offer up Weaving's foundling to perpetuate the family fortune.

Screenwriters Guy Busick and R. Christopher Murphy started working on the script in early 2013, well before our current moment but only two years after Occupy Wall Street dominated headlines. The pair were directly inspired by the likes of *Rosemary's Baby*, but as Busick recalls, "Wealth disparity was definitely on our minds when we came up with the idea. Since that disparity only grew wider over the years between the movie's inception and release, the movie's themes were even more relevant when it came out."

And look – it's not hard to see why. We're all under the pump now, and everybody's grinding. Economic instability is a grim reality for generations raised with the tacit promise of middle-class comfort waiting in their futures, only to run face-first into a world defined by massive inequality, dwindling workers' rights, a marked lack of social mobility, and an imminent climate crisis driven by unchecked corporate greed. With all that weighing on us every day, there's really no need for screenwriters to dream up some metaphorical monster; we know who is responsible for our woes, and it doesn't take much tinkering to transform the rich bastards of the real world into more directly malevolent screen villains.

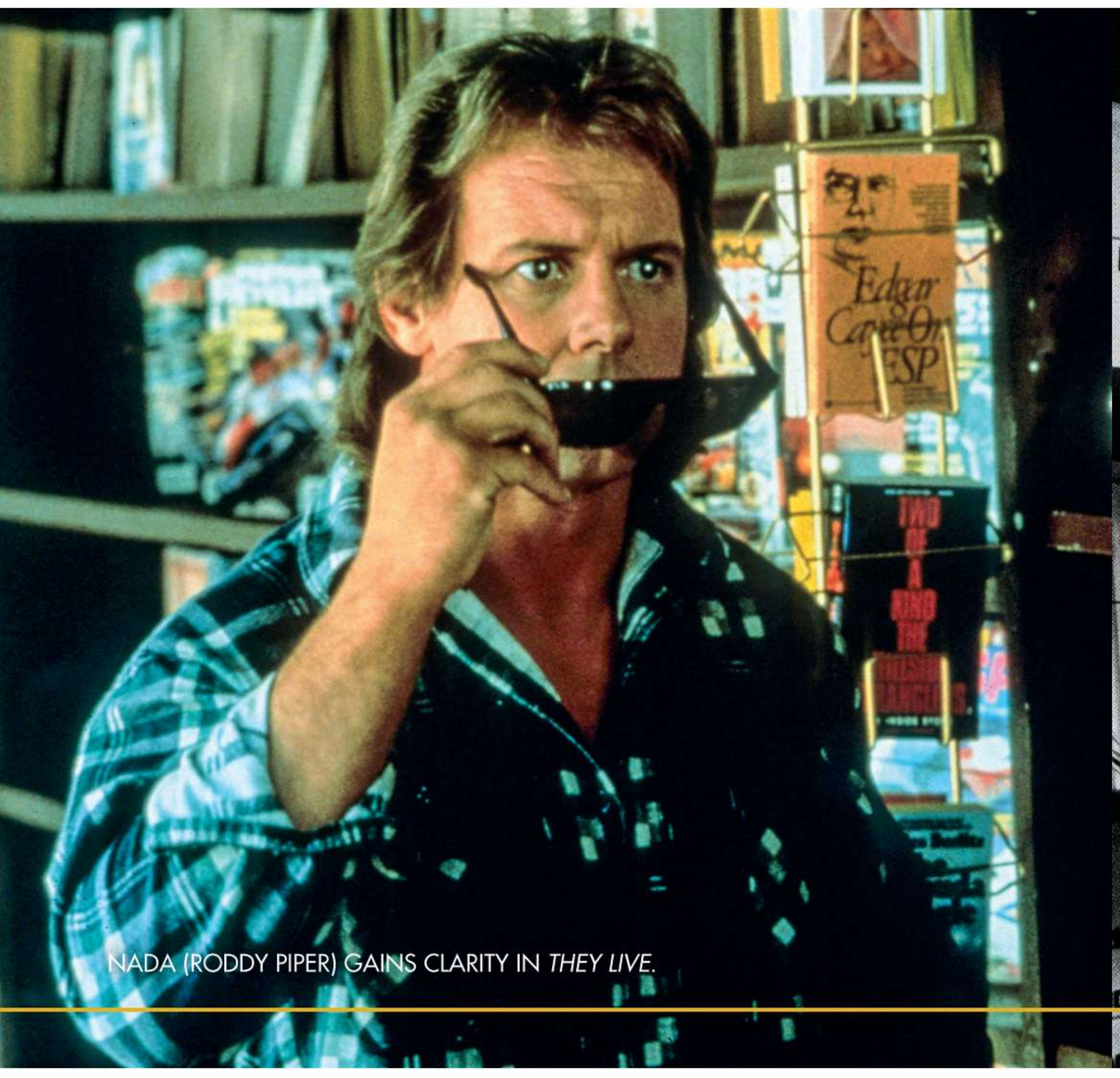
Still, as Murphy notes, "I think that sentiment is kind of baked into popular culture in a lot of ways. Charlie Chaplin was skewering the rich back in the silent era, and even in the '80s, the decade of greed, you can look at movies like *Wall Street* or even *The Goonies*, which has a group of kids trying to save their neighborhood from being turned into a golf course."

There's a pattern to this. We last had a spike in overtly class-conscious horror in the late '80s and early '90s, when conservative economic policies – Reaganomics in the US, Thatcherism in the UK, and so on – really started to take a toll on those on the lower rungs of the ladder.

1988 saw John Carpenter's superb *They Live* hit our screens, a low-budget sci-fi/action/horror hybrid which sees Rowdy Roddy Piper's homeless everyman discover that the deep social divisions he suffers under are the result of Earth having been covertly colonized by alien capitalists who are stripping the planet of its resources, the population kept in check by a combination of mass hypnosis and simply paying off any potential collaborators.

In 1989, Brian Yuzna gave us the genuinely shocking and aptly named *Society*, wherein Billy Warlock's alienated rich kid discovers that his family – and by implication, his entire social class – aren't even human but a kind of shapeshifting, Lovecraftian

SOCIETY: THE RICH GET THEIR CLAWS IN.



NADA (RODDY PIPER) GAINS CLARITY IN *THEY LIVE*.

THE RICH TWIST THE RULES TO INDULGE THEIR WORST IMPULSES IN *THE PURGE: ANARCHY*.

PHOTOS (TOP & BOTTOM FACING) COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES • PHOTO (TOP FACING) COURTESY OF WILD STREET PICTURES

parasite species, the whole thing culminating in a grotesque, body-melting orgy. Then there's *The People Under the Stairs*, Wes Craven's 1991 take on gentrification, with Brandon Adams' streetwise kid learning to his regret that the landlords who control his neighborhood (a wonderfully deranged Everett McGill and Wendy Robie) harbor monstrous secrets within their dilapidated mansion.

What do we make of the current glut of social horror? There's the conspicuous consumption and brutal retribution of *The Menu* and *Fresh*, the degenerate dynasties of *Ready or Not* and *The Invitation*, the nihilistic rage of *Mayhem* and *The Belko Experiment*, the perverse satire of *Infinity Pool*, the apparently infinite class war of *The Purge* franchise, and more.

Busick has noticed the trend and applauds it. "It seems like, as a society, we're becoming increasingly disgusted by the uber-wealthy," he says. "There's an element of wish fulfillment in seeing evil billionaires brought low. I think this is also connected to the pro-labor movement we're seeing right now, a desire from workers to take back some measure of power from management. There seems to be a pervasive dread – and anger – that we're not in control of our own destinies. I suspect we'll see many more genre tales about 'eating the rich' over the next few years – and I'm here for it!"

> *"It doesn't matter where you fall on the political spectrum. We're all subjected to a steady stream of blatant lies and hypocrisy from people who claim to have our best interests at heart while they simultaneously line their pockets."*
>
> - R. Christopher Murphy

Murphy adds, "It doesn't matter where you fall on the political spectrum. We're all subjected to a steady stream of blatant lies and hypocrisy from people who claim to have our best interests at heart while they simultaneously line their pockets."

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's essay "The Rich Boy," he wrote, "Let me tell you about the rich. They are different to you and me." In horror, they are *the other*. Horror excels at telling us who the other is. Sometimes, that's sympathetic (see Clive Barker and Anne Rice), but as a general rule, the other is the monster – it's the beast outside your window. Horror puts a face on our fears, distilling broad and sometimes inarticulable anxieties down into one iconic symbol. In this case, that face goes largely unmasked. While a little occult window dressing might be applied for the sake of fidelity to the genre, we know from our own lives that the ultrawealthy are perfectly

capable of being monstrous without a supernatural cause.

"We all wonder, how do these people sleep at night?" Murphy muses. In *Ready or Not*, Grace's husband Alex (Mark O'Brien) has a moment of clarity when he realizes that he'll stick by his family rather than his bride when the chips are down, ultimately choosing legacy (and luxury) over love.

"I think that when Alex explains that a person will do pretty much anything if your family says it's okay, it speaks to our innate distrust of the elite," Murphy points out. "The vast majority of us aren't 'in the family,' and we can't help but be suspicious of what that one percent might be willing to do to maintain their status."

With that in mind, it's worth remembering that the other isn't necessarily just what or who we're afraid of; it's also who we're allowed – or even encouraged – to hate. The "othering" of different cultures has given us a steady supply of bad guys to slaughter without the slightest moral qualm for the entire history of cinema, be they the Apache in a John Ford cavalry picture or any number of identikit communists in the action movies of the '80s. That can certainly have consequences in real life: the action movie to recruiting propaganda pipeline was codified by *Top Gun*, after all.

It's tempting, and fun, to wonder if the long-term outcome of this trend is simply the proletariat feeling a little less guilty when the time comes to fire up the guillotines, but perhaps that's ascribing too much purpose to a broad artistic trend. At the end of the day, films like these are just articulating an already popular sentiment, or rather resentment: a seething anger at the unfairness of the world and the people who benefit from it.

Then again, that widespread anger is real. While you might argue that cheering when Samara Weaving bloodily turns the tables or hooting at the over-the-top mayhem of *The Purge: Election Year* is simple catharsis, it's worth remembering that people cheered and hooted just as enthusiastically when the OceanGate submersible foundered with all hands, and no amount of handwringing and moralizing about the human tragedy of the accident stopped the "dead billionaire" jokes from flying thick and fast on Twitter. It's fun to watch fictional plutocrats die, and apparently, for some of us, it's fun to watch the real deal.

Still, we know that movies don't inspire violence, despite what the occasional desperate defense attorney might plead, so even if we were to one day rise up and throw off our shackles, these films wouldn't be the cause of it. But they clearly show that, while we may be a long way off from actually butchering the ultrawealthy in their droves, as a culture, we are definitely thinking about it an awful lot. What these films offer is catharsis. For sure, it's probably a bad idea to kill your boss or landlord, but a little class-conscious horror can work wonders in terms of sating the revolutionary urge.

Movie monsters rise and fall in popularity, and while we're still riding out the long tail of the second zombie wave, the obscenely rich are clearly the defining antagonists of this moment in horror. They're the perfect monster for our time. Lord knows they've earned it. 💀

POLITICIAN (ELIZABETH MITCHELL) MEETS PROLETARIAT (NOT ABRAHAM LINCOLN) IN *THE PURGE: ELECTION YEAR*, WHILE WORKING STIFF LEO BARNES (FRANK GRILLO) JUST TRIES TO DO HIS JOB.

READY OR NOT: SAMARA WEAVING FTW.

PHOTO (TOP) COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL PICTURES • PHOTO (BOTTOM) COURTESY OF SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

CAN'T HAVE AN *ARMY OF DARKNESS* WITHOUT SOME SOLDIERS OF DARKNESS. THANKS, HOWARD!

HOWARD BERGER, NIGHTMARE CRAFTER: PART TWO

BY VE NEILL

IN OUR LAST ISSUE, LEGENDS MAKEUP ACADEMY CO-FOUNDER VE NEILL STARTED A CONVERSATION WITH HOWARD BERGER, AND SHE DELIVERED SUCH GREAT INSIGHTS INTO THE EFFECTS MASTER THAT WE DECIDED TO SPREAD THEIR CHAT OVER TWO ISSUES. READ THE FIRST PART – COVERING BERGER'S CHILDHOOD, EDUCATION, AND HIS EARLY WORK WITH KNB EFX – IN FANGORIA VOL. 2 ISSUE 21.

Before Howard Berger went on to run juggernaut effects house KNB EFX with Greg Nicotero, it's fair to say he paid his dues.

He told me a crazy story from those low-budget days: "So, we were doing this film for Sam Raimi called *Army of Darkness*. We shot 22 days straight in Acton, California, at night and got paid $700 a week flat." Who wouldn't want to work on *Army of Darkness*, right? One of the most beloved horror films of all time?

THE MAN BEHIND THE MASKS: HOWARD BERGER.

THE HEART (AND HEAD) OF A LION: LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WE HAVE AN ASLAN.

But it wasn't all fun and games. "We did so much crazy stuff for that show, and some of it was downright dangerous. At one point we were puppeteering a skeleton from underneath it on the ground. We just covered ourselves with a piece of black duvetyne [cloth]. There were explosions going off everywhere and there was fire falling on us, but we didn't care because we were making monsters and working in the movies. We would do anything for Sam Raimi."

Well, maybe not *anything*: "We of course didn't know about the fire and how close the bombs actually were until after we saw the making-of footage. We actually could have been killed. The whole show was pretty wild."

A lot of Howard's early stories are like this – getting pulled over by the police for carrying lifelike wolves in the back of his car, sharing buckets of KFC to survive the week. But after two decades working as "The Gore Guys" with KNB EFX (also co-founded by Robert Kurtzman, who went on to start Precinct 13 Entertainment), Berger started getting his long-owed dues. In 2006, he won his first Academy Award for Best Achievement in Makeup (with Tami Lane) thanks to the beautiful and extensive work he did on *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*.

"In 2004 we started prepping nine months for *Narnia*. We shot for eight months in New Zealand. I do believe *The Lion, Witch and The Wardrobe* was my favorite film I ever worked on – and not because we won an Oscar. I really became immersed in the *Narnia* world and I didn't want it to end." The 2005 live-action adaptation of C.S. Lewis' beloved children's fantasy book was a blockbuster success and critically favored, with reviewers giving special attention to the special effects. It was the first in the *Chronicles of Narnia* franchise, which included the sequels *Prince Caspian* and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

Howard continued, "The director Andrew Adamson really allowed us to go the distance and come up with amazing things that we were proud of, things we had never done before. We did mechanical creatures in a forest. We did 175 creatures for a hundred days of shooting. We had a massive crew from around the world. It was the biggest thing I had ever done, and it was the most exhausting. I had a fantastic crew at KNB and a fantastic crew on location. I had Tami Lane with me on all the films, and I never stress with her at my side. Then we were fortunate enough to be recognized by our peers. That's just gravy because, as you know, that's not why we do it. It's because we love what we do. Then we got to go back two more times for the sequels, which I enjoyed just as much."

It's true that awards aren't why we do it. Still, two years after *Dawn Treader*, Howard went on to work on Sacha Gervasi's film *Hitchcock*, for which he was nominated for another Oscar. "It fell in my lap," Howard said of the job. "I was friends with Peter Dinklage from the second *Narnia* film and he wanted to do a biopic on Hervé Villechaize. Sacha Gervasi, who wrote *The Terminal* for Spielberg, was going to direct it. I had one day to do a test makeup on Peter. I got a life cast of Hervé from his wife, which was very helpful. So, I did my best version of Hervé on Pete."

The Villechaize biopic was unfortunately not to be, Howard explained, but a few years later he received a call from Gervasi who said, "'I'm doing a film about Hitchcock, and we have Tony Hopkins for the role. Would you be interested in meeting with Tony?' Of course, I said yes."

After meeting with Hopkins and producer Ivan Reitman, Howard got the role, in part because he and Anthony Hopkins shared a disdain for treating the project like Oscar bait. Hopkins told him that the other three people who interviewed for the gig all said they thought the job would net them an

PHOTOS COURTESY OF HOWARD BERGER & VE NEILL

Academy Award. “Tony was totally turned off by that. ‘You were the only one who didn’t say you were going to win an award for this.’ At that point I said, ‘I hope you also think I’m good enough and can pull this off.’”

Howard knew the success of the project would rely on testing. “I told Tony the only way this is going to work is we were going to do a multitude of tests with all different appliances. We wound up doing six tests. Richie Alonzo and Peter [Montagna] and others were in the shop sculpting. Tony was in 100%. If I told him we wanted to do a test the next morning, he said, ‘I will be here at 6am.’” After the first test, “Tony says, ‘This is great; I don’t even need to act.’ I said, ‘Oh no no, you do.’” But Howard felt the makeup wasn’t quite right – that they’d lost Hopkins somewhere in there. “My wife Mirjam, who has a great eye and whom I trust implicitly, says, ‘You need Hitchcock Hopkins.’ So we removed the full nose and did a nose tip, nostrils, tried a whole bunch of stuff. Production had wanted him in four weeks but we fought for nine weeks, and Tony agreed so we got it. The final makeup was a horseshoe piece, ear lobes, nose tip, lower lip and contact lenses. When we did the final test Tony said he didn’t want to wear contact lenses, then we put them in and he totally agreed. It made it all work together beautifully.”

Finally, as more and more people talk about artificial intelligence these days in every industry, I was curious what Howard’s thoughts were about AI. He said it can be a tool like any other.

“Think about when photography came in to play. All the fine artists were up in arms, but that led into the abstract renaissance. When Photoshop was introduced, everybody said that it was cheating, and now we all use it for everything. CGI, the same thing. AI is a tool, as well. We don’t understand it just yet. It is dangerous when put in the wrong hands, of course, and I think this is where we are all concerned. All of these tools create a renaissance in art and hopefully this new one will not be used immorally. Instead we might take advantage of its power and resources, when used respectfully and responsibly." 💀

ED GEIN'S MOTHER MAKES A GUEST APPEARANCE IN *HITCHCOCK* TO CONVINCE THE MASTER TO TAKE ON A LIL FILM CALLED *PSYCHO*.

HOWARD'S HITCHCOCKING HOPKINS.

IT CAME FROM PITTSBURGH:

The Rise and Resurrection of CHILLER THEATRE

BY MICHAEL VARRATI

When Pittsburgh's regional NBC affiliate Channel 11 went live on September 1st, 1957, it seems unlikely that anyone tuning in could have predicted that the first voice heard on the network would one day make horror history. But for Bill Cardille, a winsome radio and local TV news personality, that's exactly what happened.

TOP: *KILLERS FROM SPACE*, IMMORTALIZED IN THE ORIGINAL CHILLER THEATRE INTRO

BOTTOM: A PROMOTIONAL PHOTO OF THE *CHILLER THEATRE* CAST, CIRCA 1976.

After stints on Indiana, Pennsylvania's WDAD radio and Erie's television station WICU, Cardille found himself in Pittsburgh, at the network that would make him a household name. A journeyman of what were essentially the pioneer days of local broadcast, Cardille did a bit of everything. In addition to giving Channel 11's (formerly WIIC, now WPXI) daily weather report, Cardille could also be seen hosting popular studio wrestling shows and teen dance programs. His easy nature and hosting versatility quickly ingratiated Cardille to the residents of the Steel City, and his assuring presence made him a household favorite.

Then, in 1963, Bill Cardille made the move that would change his life — and genre history — forever. On September 14th, Channel 11 debuted a late-night horror program called *Chiller Theatre* with Cardille as the host. The set-up was simple: Every Saturday night, starting at 11:30pm, *Chiller Theatre* would air a double feature of science fiction flicks and fright films, with Cardille popping in occasionally for skits and levity.

Given the moniker "Chilly Billy" by fans, Cardille was fairly unique among the era's pantheon of fledgling horror hosts in that he didn't adopt an alternate persona for the role, but rather chose to host as himself. For many, this distinction was significant, and perhaps even a key factor for Cardille becoming championed by a city very much in transition.

"Pittsburgh always got a bad wrap," says Lori Cardille, legendary star of *Day of the Dead* and daughter of Chilly Billy. "It was the butt of jokes. We were the underdogs in the country, in a way... so, we stuck together. There was a sense of family... We all went through the steel mills closing down... we were not defensive, per se, but wanted to put the message out there that this was a great place to live. It's all about the heart... and my father was all about the heart."

It's that direct connection with the city where Cardille believes her father made the most impact. "My dad was so good with the intimacy of television," she says, "*Chiller* was live... and at the end of the show, he'd sit there on a stool, smoking a cigarette... it was the sixties, remember... and he would talk to the people. He'd talk about baseball, local stories, etc... he made it feel like you were with him in person. He loved the people of Pittsburgh... he felt like he was doing a service. If we went out for dinner, so many people would come up to the table... and he always acknowledged everyone. He'd never turn them away."

A RARE 1974 ILLUSTRATION OF CARDILLE & FRIENDS BY PHIL WILSON, PROVIDED COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

Certainly, Cardille's accessibility made a huge impact in the case of one particular up-and-coming filmmaker. As a matter of record, George A. Romero often spoke of the fact that it was during a viewing of *Chiller Theatre*'s presentation of the *Last Man on Earth* that he and his friends decided that they could and should also make a movie. The result, of course, became *Night of the Living Dead*.

Shot under the title *Night of the Flesh Eaters*, Romero invited Bill Cardille to play a small role as himself in the film… and thus the cycle of fright came full circle.

"George always credited my dad for getting his career moving in the right direction," says Lori Cardille, further citing the fact that Chilly Billy would often reference shooting the movie on *Chiller Theatre* in real time as it was in production.

ROMERO OFTEN SPOKE OF THE FACT THAT IT WAS DURING A VIEWING OF *CHILLER THEATRE*'S PRESENTATION OF *THE LAST MAN ON EARTH* THAT HE AND HIS FRIENDS DECIDED THAT THEY COULD AND SHOULD ALSO MAKE A MOVIE.

Undoubtedly, the unexpected global success of *Night of the Living Dead* brought an outside awareness to Cardille and *Chiller Theatre*, but it was still the passion within Pittsburgh that kept the show going strong. As the '60s made way into a new decade, the fervor of *Chiller Theatre* would only grow more intense. Reaching an awareness that was rarely matched by other regional shows of a similar nature, *Chiller Theatre* (eventually renamed *Chiller Theater*) saw a number of celebrities stop by to join Cardille over the years, including Vincent Price, Phyllis Diller, Jerry Lewis, Bruno Sammartino, Barbara Feldon, and George Romero himself. Indeed, *Chiller*'s prominence was as such that it kept *Saturday Night Live* off NBC affiliate WIIC in Pittsburgh for the first four years of the comedy show's run. The city *refused* to miss Chilly Billy.

As the audience and attention for *Chiller Theater* grew, so did the show. A cast of characters were introduced in later years, likely to meet the rising national interest in sketch comedy. Dubbed the "Chiller Family," Cardille was joined by an ensemble that included femme fatale Terminal Stare (Donna Rae), Georgette the Fudgemaker (Bonnie Barney), Norman the Castle Keeper (Norman Elder), and Stefan the Castle Prankster (Steve Luncinski). Together, the Chiller Family brought levity to their spooky offerings, and furthered the communal connection to the city that loved them. During this era of *Chiller*'s hey-day and onward, it was not unlikely to see Cardille and co. at any number of live events, from drive-in screenings to river boat cruises.

CARDILLE'S *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD* CAMEO, INTERVIEWING SHERIFF MCCLELLAND (GEORGE KOSANA).

But, as with all good things, *Chiller Theater* came to an end in 1983, when a shifting media environment saw network management push for more "news-based" programming. By refocusing the Saturday night lineup, WPXI didn't allow much room for Cardille and co. to host during key hours.

"People were so upset. It's just interesting how… local television changed in the '80s," says Lori Cardille. "It was almost like they were embarrassed by the old TV style."

For a brief period, *Chiller Theater* was replaced by another program, *The Saturday Late Show*, which still attempted to air horror films in the wee hours. However, without Cardille and the local connection, viewers dispersed and the slot's genre connections were abandoned completely. Bill Cardille persisted as a beloved media personality in the Steel City, continuing to deliver the noontime weather report on WPXI and eventually returning to radio waves as the host of a daily show on WJAS. He also continued to routinely appear at horror conventions and related events around the city until his passing in 2016.

Cardille's legacy continues to shine among horror enthusiasts and those who follow in his footsteps. Over the decades, impassioned remembrances from monster kids and Pittsburgh residents alike have kept Cardille's contributions at the forefront of conversation. Now, nearly four decades later, a dedicated team from within the very walls that helped launch the original show have done the unexpected… and brought *Chiller Theater* back from the grave.

"I grew up in a small town about 40 minutes outside of Pittsburgh," says Jake Klingensmith, floor director for WPXI's morning news and co-creator/producer of the revived *Chiller Theater*. "I'm only 30 years old, so I didn't get to watch the [original] show growing up, but I heard a lot about it. I wanted to work at Channel 11 because of the hope of trying to bring it back."

In revealing this goal, Klingensmith speaks to how *Chiller*'s legacy wove itself into the local fabric of cinephiles and fright fans. A whole generation of film enthusiasts grew up in the wake of the show's impact, while not actually getting to see it on the air.

"That's the whole reason I wanted to revive the show — because I knew that there were people out there like myself who love these movies, and we need to keep them going," Klingensmith says.

But despite his designs on reviving the show from day one of his employment, Klingensmith knew that the path to resurrecting *Chiller*

BIG SHOES TO FILL: WPXI METEOROLOGIST SCOTT HARBAUGH IS THE NEW FACE OF *CHILLER THEATER*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAKE KLINGENSMITH • PHOTO BY DAVID WATENPOOL

HARBAUGH AND FRIEND BRING *CHILLER THEATER* BACK TO PITTSBURGH LIVING ROOMS.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAKE KLINGENSMITH • PHOTO BY DAVID WATENPOOL

Theater would not be easy. He shares that he kept the idea in the back of his mind for years, but it wasn't until a fellow director (and subsequent *Chiller Theater* revival co-creator), Jeremy Lynch, moved into a sales position at the network and helped motivate the discussion of bringing back Pittsburgh's favorite fright.

"I always credit [Jeremy] for laying the groundwork," says Klingensmith. "He set up the initial meeting with the sales and marketing people upstairs. He made the powerpoint and then let me do what I do. That was in 2018."

To host the new version of the show, Klingensmith had his eye on beloved WPXI weatherman Scott Harbaugh. "I always wanted Scott," he says, "not only because Scott is a weatherman — Chilly was a weatherman as well — but he's a local; he'd been working here since 2005 and he had a pretty great presence."

Additionally, Harbaugh got another extremely important vote of confidence. "Nobody could ever be my dad. But Scott, when he interviewed me — and this is how I judge and make decisions in life — is the person's heart, their intentions, their kindness," says Lori Cardille. "Scott is a very kind and sensitive man. He knew my dad and looked up to my father. There was no hesitation internally for me. It just was right. It's about authenticity. It's about connectedness."

With a host attached who not only understood *Chiller Theater*'s legacy, but also the implications of its local connections, the team set out to bring their version of the show to life, while also being deeply aware of the potential weight they were placing on their shoulders.

"We wanted to do the show right and to honor the city," says Klingensmith. "We felt we'd be doing a huge disservice if we were to do the show incorrectly. We can't remake Chilly Billy… we had to take it in our own direction. And that was something that we were worried about, because we didn't know if the city would accept it or not."

While dealing with their anxieties of making sure the show was executed properly, the team was hit with another hurdle in the form of COVID-19. Initially set to start production in early 2020, the project was shut down and remained touch-and-go until late 2021, when Harbaugh urged the team that the time was right. Forging connections with two popular Pittsburgh haunted attractions, Scarehouse and 100 Hundred Acre Manor (as filming location and show sponsor, respectively), the new *Chiller* team began shooting episodes.

"We keep everything local — there's not one aspect of the show that's stock. Harbaugh made the graphics because he's a weatherman. I shot and edited it all — plus I did all the music. Everything we try to do is local," says Klingensmith.

With a deep love of cinema, horror, and Pittsburgh, the new *Chiller Theater* team debuted the new series on September 9th, 2023, with an airing of *The Brain from Planet Arous* — a callback to the first movie that Bill Cardille himself ever hosted on the show.

To the delight of the revival team and Pittsburgh itself, the new *Chiller Theater* was met with open arms… and from the initial eight episode run (which, of course, included *Night of the Living Dead*), there's already hopes of more to come.

For Jake Klingensmith, who sought out a job at Channel 11 with this very goal, the moment is especially poignant. "It blew my mind," Klingensmith says of the audience reaction, "The night before we went live with the first episode, I woke up with a panic attack — I was worried people were going to hate it — but they liked it. Taking this show that was so legendary for Pittsburgh… and putting out a different type of show — and seeing everyone say, 'this is great!' I was blown away. It was really a dream come true. We're out there making the show for the love of making the show… and I think people see that."

"I'm happy for my father," says Lori Cardille of *Chiller Theater*'s legacy and revival. "Whatever anybody does around his memory keeps him alive… for my family… for the people around him who loved him and appreciated him. He is one of the pioneers, not only of television, but of the horror genre. He would be so shocked. He'd be so happy. He used to have this giggle… and I can just hear him now."

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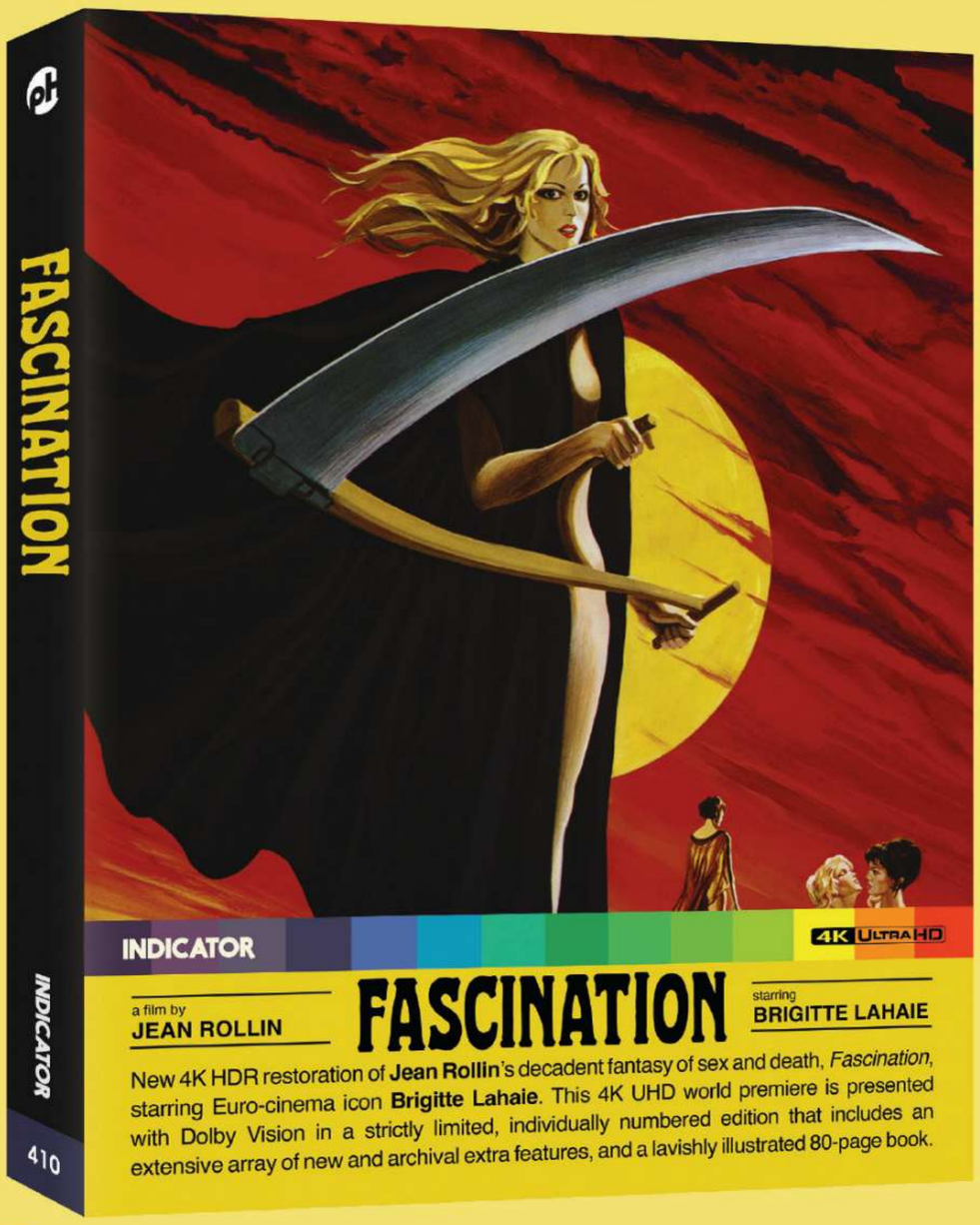
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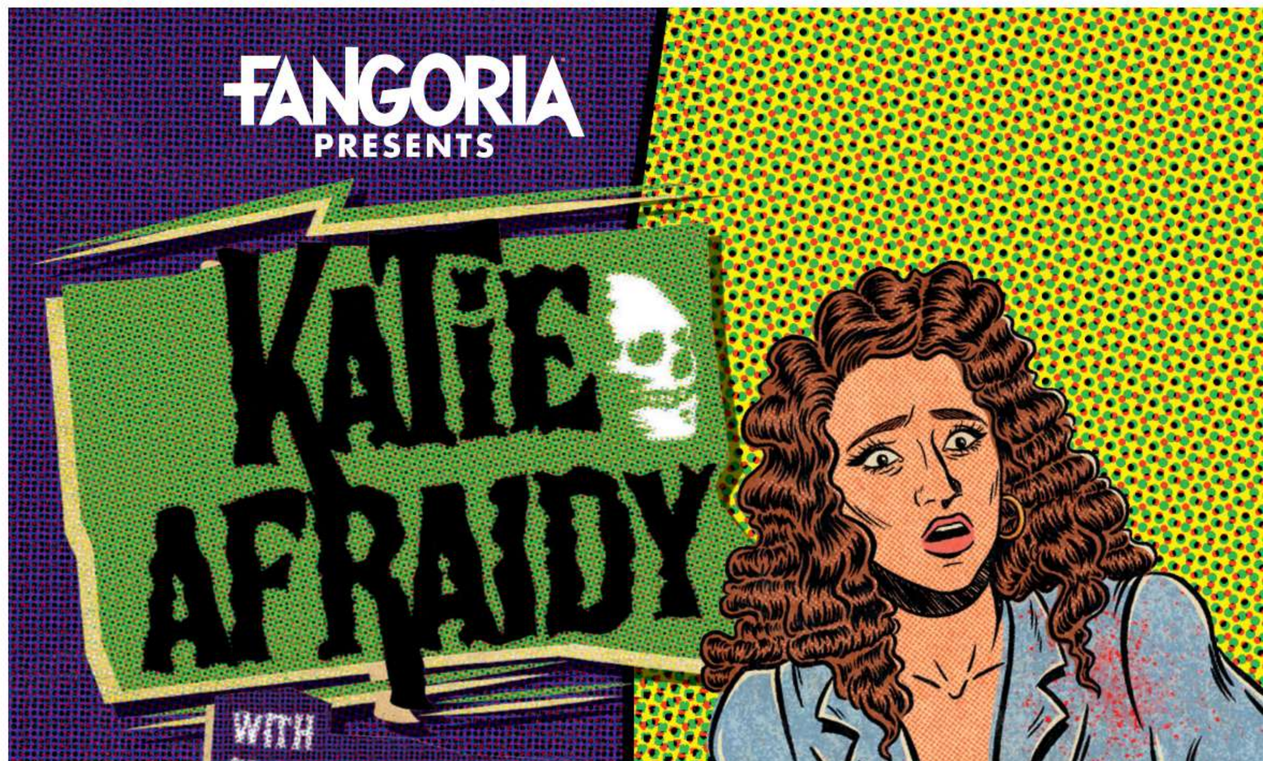

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GOING WITH THE GRAIN

BY_TRAVIS_STEVENS

Cinematographer Ksusha Genenfeld is on a mission to resurrect shot-on-film horror – and we're just along for the ride.

There is a confidence in Ksusha Genenfeld that you can sense from your first conversation with her – a confidence in who she is, what she does and how she does it. This clarity is reflected in her work as a cinematographer. Even when the images are dreamy or abstract, the intention is clear. It has an emotional impact. A reason to exist. A purpose. This is just part of what makes her such an exciting person to work with, as I did on the film *A Wounded Fawn*.

Genenfeld is now twenty-six years old. She's been shooting professionally for five years, and in that short time has already produced an impressive body of work. Thanks to fashion films for Emporio Armani and Loro Piana, various music videos, the Cannes Short Film Corner project *Godspeed*, and her work on *A Wounded Fawn*, which earned her a FANGORIA Chainsaw Award nomination for Best Cinematography for her very first feature film, the critical praise and audience attention to the images that she's helped create have only grown.

But her journey to this point is filled with as much adventure as the frames themselves. "I was born and raised in Russia, in a rural city called Yekaterinburg, right by the Ural Mountains in Siberia. Summers in Russia were always beautiful. The sun almost never left the horizon – we had three hours of true darkness during those warm months. Because of that, my friends and I would often stay up late, hanging out near lakes and rivers. Endless nights of getting into trouble, riding bikes around the neighborhood, playing games and sharing exciting stories."

Genenfeld was fortunate to grow up in a family that supported the arts. "Photography has been my passion since I was a little kid, carrying a still camera wherever I went, capturing

moments on medium and 35mm formats. I still continue to snap photos now and then." In addition to her younger brother, a successful Russian actor, her older sister, Sasha is a rising fashion photographer. Although the girls spent their teen years apart, the spark to create was strong in both since childhood. She says that while they unfortunately did not live in the same country during their transformative years – and therefore didn't have much time together to discuss art – Sasha's talent has never ceased to amaze her.

From an early age, movies worked their magic on Genenfeld. She recalls the first movie that made a profound impact on her. "It was *American Beauty*, directed by Sam Mendes and shot by Conrad L. Hall... I remember watching this film and being completely blown away by the beautifully crafted and mesmerizing visuals. This film became my first cinematography teacher; it taught me about the importance of framing, coverage, lighting, and intention. Sam Mendes' insight on the overuse of close-ups in cinema resonated with me, deepening my understanding of their significance. I love holding onto close-up shots for special moments in the films I shoot."

One scene in particular stayed with her. "The use of the color, specifically red, the striking theatrical lighting, contrast, and saturation in this film left a meaningful impression on me. The iconic rose petal scene is definitely an unforgettable image from American cinema. I was so impacted by this film that it inspired me to write a twenty-page essay about it while I was in college. I admired how this film was able to explore various themes without overwhelming the audience. To me, this film felt like poetry. I've always been very sensitive to imagery and this movie really opened my eyes to the role of a cinematographer. I dreamed that one day, I could become one too."

The color red shows up in many of her most abiding influences, though some more bloody than rosy. "When I think of horror, the image of *Carrie* drenched in blood comes to mind – it's absolutely iconic. The mix of innocence and violence in that visual is so powerful. I will never forget Carrie's terrifying look on her face. Best. Prom. Ever. Another striking visual that haunts me is Lynch's baby creature in *Eraserhead*. I watched this film in high school while I was still living in Russia so the whole film was dubbed,

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KSUSHA GENENFELD

SCENES ON 16: CINEMATOGRAPHER KSUSHA GENENFELD SURROUNDED BY FRAMES FROM *A WOUNDED FAWN*.

FAWN FRAMES: JOSH RUBEN AND SARAH LIND OCCUPY THE DREAMLIKE SPACE OF THE SHOT-ON-16MM *A WOUNDED FAWN*.

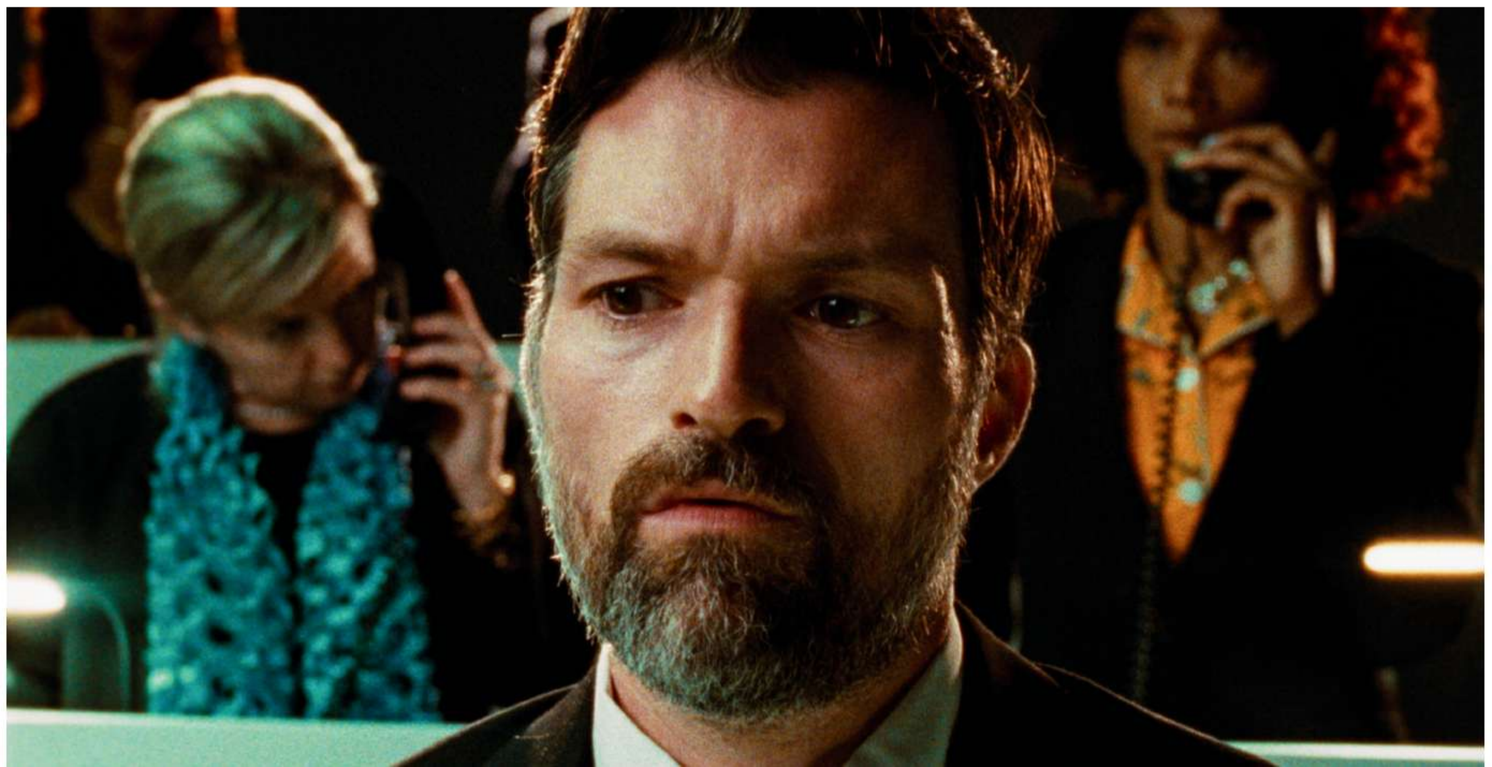
which was hilarious, but it was also absolutely terrifying. The slimy, weird lizard-looking baby has never been able to leave my mind. I absolutely adore *Jennifer's Body*. This film will always be special to me, it's the perfect movie for a night in – to be fully entertained, laugh, and get scared. *Jennifer's Body* is iconic for its visuals. The film's over-the-top cinematography, with extreme close-ups and saturated lighting, truly captures Jennifer's rage after her attack. I always love when filmmakers make bold choices, and this is definitely one of these movies."

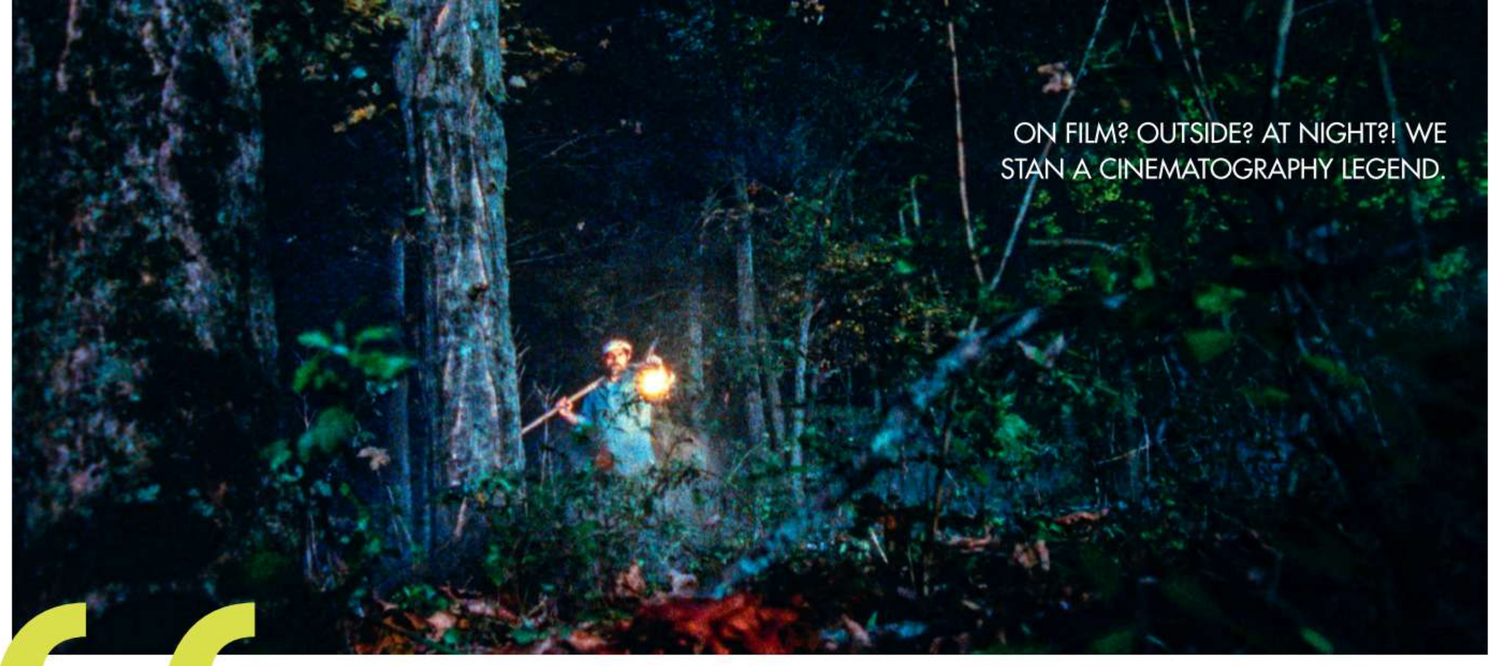
At fourteen Genenfeld moved to the United States on her own to pursue her dream of becoming a filmmaker. This goal brought her to California, to a college resting on the hip of Hollywood. Genenfeld attended Loyola Marymount University, where she studied cinematography as a film production major. "A special debt of gratitude goes to my mentor, Bill Bennett, ASC, who took me under his wing, teaching me invaluable lessons throughout the years. Without him I wouldn't have the career I have today."

But Genenfeld stresses that college wasn't the only filmmaking experience she found valuable. "I learned many valuable skills from attending this program. However, it's important to acknowledge the informal education I received – lessons I learned through my own explorations and help from others. My childhood was filled with taking photographs and making many short and silly horror films with friends, which proved to be some of the most valuable training I could've done. As a kid my friends and I made countless films together and I think it really shaped me into who I am today."

Our childhood fears and experiences, the ways we dare ourselves to expand our own boundaries, make for the best sort of education in storytelling. "My love for horror began when my older sister introduced me to the genre. I would watch them, often with my eyes closed, with so much fear, just to prove to her that I was mature enough to hang out with her older friends. Little did I know that those experiences would make me fall in love with the horror genre."

Anyone who's seen Genenfeld's work can't miss the influence of light and shadow playing throughout each scene. It's just one of the essentials of filmmaking that inspire her particular passion for the medium. "The impact of light in films is incredibly powerful to me. Cinematography is something that truly moves me. I have great appreciation and respect for filmmakers who can convey emotions through visuals. To me, that's a remarkable achievement – a film that can speak poetry. The use of subliminal images is crucial in filmmaking. It's beautiful to be moved by the *mise en scène* without comprehending the exact reasons. Just letting your body feel the emotions is quite special. Everything needs to come together to create this magic – elements like editing, wardrobe, performances, and of course production design that go hand in hand with cinematography."





ON FILM? OUTSIDE? AT NIGHT?! WE STAN A CINEMATOGRAPHY LEGEND.

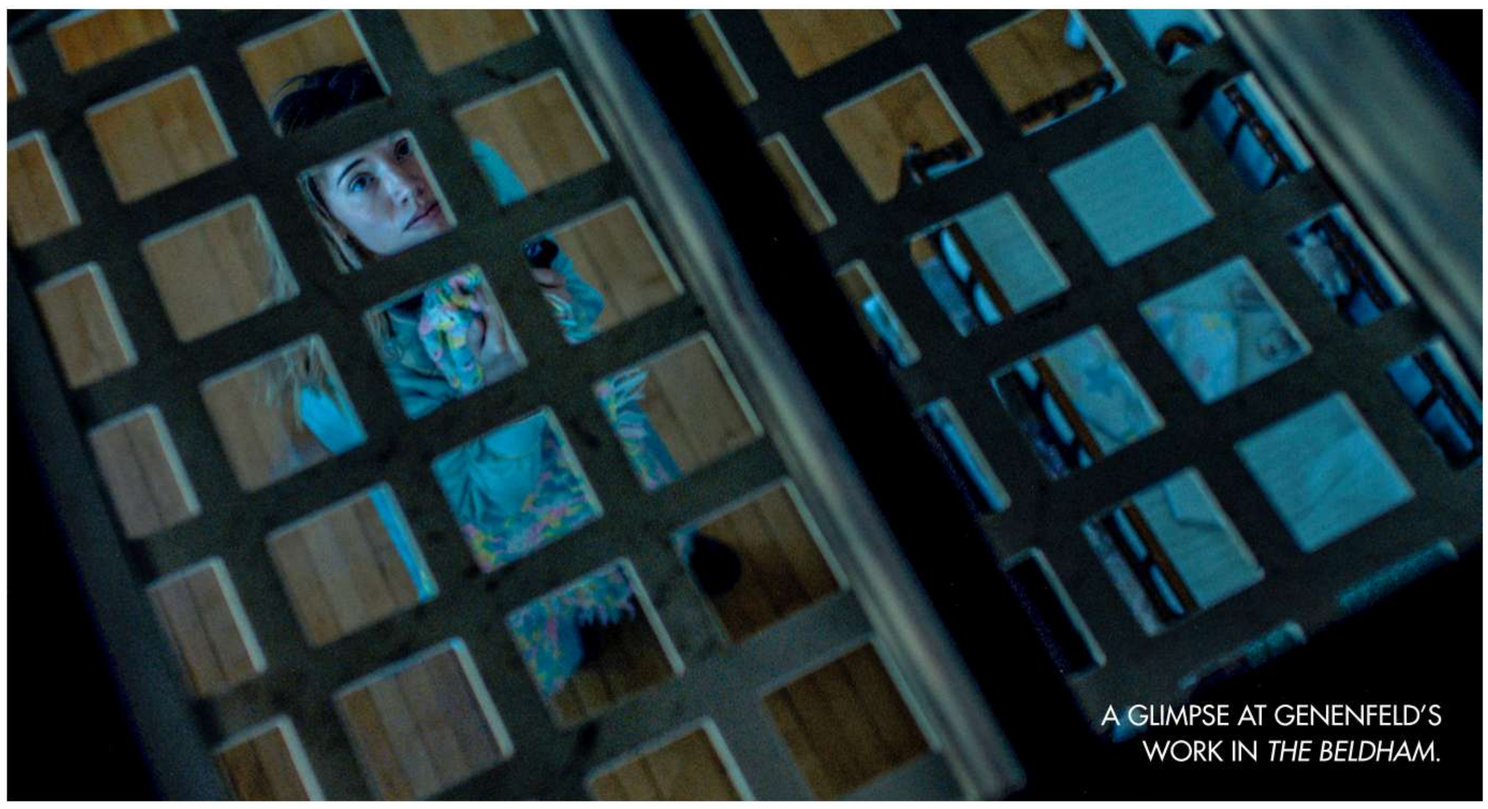
Genenfeld has recently wrapped production on *The Beldham*, a psychological horror feature from writer and director Angela Gulner. The story follows a new mother as she moves in with her own mom to help her flip a historic farmhouse… only to discover a presence with designs on her child. "This film explores motherhood, aging and the generational changing of the guard. It's also a monster movie… a dark family thriller that plays on tropes of monster movies to bring women's perspectives to life. We delve into the fine line between care and control. Filming this movie was an amazing experience. Angela and I connected right away, and together, I think we made something bold. When she shared the script with me, I read it in one sitting and immediately reached out to her, saying, 'I love this script so much, I just want to make this with you.' And so we did!"

Visually, *The Beldham* takes inspiration from films such as *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Babadook*, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, and *A Ghost Story*. "During prep, we approached the project with gentle energy. We carefully selected the look and crafted a shot list that mirrored the story and its characters. This film is very special to me, and I often think of it as heartbreaking poetry. I can't wait for all of you to see it!"

Genenfeld has already accomplished so much that she's become a paragon to those interested in shooting movies for a living. "My advice is pretty cliché, but I think it is so important – believe in yourself and never give up. You have to work really hard for what you want. So many times I've been discouraged and I've hit many low points, but you just have to keep going and keep pushing. Shoot as much as you can, and don't worry if your taste hasn't caught up to your skills yet. Keep setting new goals for yourself. The more you work on films, the more you'll learn and be able to see your progress."

After all, she says, a lot of her own learning comes from trial and error. "Making mistakes and learning from them became a huge part of my growth as a cinematographer. People say you want to learn from other people's mistakes, but I don't think you learn quite as well compared to when you have failed yourself. It's not so fun at the time, but it was in those experiences that I was able to really hone my skills."

> "Here's something important that people don't talk much about: **be cool!** Your personality and how you connect with others matter… Your peers will be just as talented, so your personality will totally set you apart. **Just be fucking cool!**" - Ksusha Genenfeld



A GLIMPSE AT GENENFELD'S WORK IN *THE BELDHAM*.

And she points out another vital element to success in this industry, or any other, really: "Here's something important that people don't talk much about: be cool! Your personality and how you connect with others matter. Being a good leader and handling stress well will make directors want to work with you again. As you progress in your career, your peers will be just as talented, so your personality will totally set you apart. Just be fucking cool!"

Genenfeld also touches on the importance of taking advantage of opportunities as they arise. "I came up working on fairly small-budget shorts and music videos, although those could feel limiting at times…. Aim to achieve high production value even on a low-budget shoot. Get better equipment, work with people that are more experienced than you, and find ways to make your locations look grander and more pristine. Ask for help, rely on your friends. Filmmaking is all about collaboration and I truly believe that you cannot get anywhere in this industry without leaning on your peers for support! No one makes films alone, and that's what makes this industry so beautiful. Working together is what makes it so special; you get to create art as a team!"

Inventiveness, fearless leadership and a belief in her own instincts – these are just some of the qualities I hear in Genenfeld's voice, and that anyone can see reflected in her work. Her delightful mix of artistic ambition and pragmatic know-how make a rare and winning combination for the world of horror filmmaking. 💀

Tony Timpone's

ELEGIES

DAYS WITH DARIO

It's June 2022, and I'm nervously pacing inside the reception room at NYC's Walter Reade Theater, where a private party is about to take place honoring the legendary Dario Argento. Will the 82-year-old Italian Master of Horror remember me? It's been 13 years since we last met, and he's no spring chicken...

"Tony, how are you?!" Dario exuberantly exclaims in his customary broken English, as he greets me with a warm embrace. I needn't have worried, as it's like no time has passed between us.

Dario was in town for Lincoln Center and Italy's Cinecittà's "Beware of Dario Argento: A 20-Film Retrospective" that presented the director's nearly entire cinematic catalog in gruesomely gorgeous 4K digital restorations. The childlike filmmaker was on Cloud Nine as many of his classics were finally being shown uncut on the big screen in the US for the first time. 1970's *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, which launched Italy's *giallo* craze, opened the fest, with Dario taking part in a sparkling Q&A. Ironically, *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* was the first Argento film I ever watched, hacked up for local TV in the 1980s. I initially became aware of Argento in August 1977 when the US trailer for *Suspiria* totally freaked me out on late night TV. Completely preoccupied with the summer of *Star Wars*, I never caught Argento's masterpiece in theaters back then. Excluding VHS, it would take 40 years before seeing Synapse's 4K restoration launch at Montreal's Fantasia Film Festival's cavernous Hall auditorium in 2017 to right that wrong!

As a kid in a pre-Internet age, I didn't do a deep dive on the man himself until I read about him in the pages of FANGORIA, courtesy of a 1984 two-part interview by British scribe Martin Coxhead (issues 34-35). Once I became editor shortly thereafter, one of the articles I am most proud of publishing was Tim Lucas' revolutionary "The Butchering of Argento" (#66, 8/87). Lucas revealed how US distributors were censoring and fatally diluting the Italian maestro's work for unfortunate American audiences. I saw this first hand; I was at my Fango desk for only a few weeks when New Line Cinema screened *Creepers* for press in August 1985. This bowdlerized version of his *Phenomena* (shorn of 33 minutes!) left me completely befuddled. Not until Lincoln Center played the restored *Phenomena* in 2022 could I appreciate the film's full dreamlike brilliance.

The same summer *Creepers* opened, Dario and actress/screenwriter/girlfriend Daria Nicolodi crossed the Atlantic to ballyhoo the film despite the distributor chop job. Years later, I found out that the duo attended a dinner bash held in their honor at the Middle Village, Queens, home of television film booker Chris Steinbrunner. Just nine short blocks from where I lived! I couldn't believe that horror royalty was breaking bread in my own backyard... and I wasn't there! (Fango writer Tim Ferrante and *Cinefantastique* NYC bureau chief Dan Scapperotti mingled with Dario and Daria.)

I finally crossed paths with Dario in person just by chance in September 1991. New Line was staging a publicity stunt at the Mayflower Hotel, where studio cash cow Robert Englund was donating his Freddy Krueger costume to the American Museum of the Moving Image as a promotion for the upcoming *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*. As I was exiting through the Central Park hotel's restaurant, I spied Argento eating breakfast by himself, oblivious to the press event in the other room! Not shy, I excitedly introduced myself. He revealed that he was in town to write his next film, *Aura's Enigma*, which eventually became 1993's *Trauma*.

The coincidences didn't stop there. Unbeknownst to the director, NYC's leading repertory house, the Film Forum, would be offering an Argento double feature less than a week later

PHOTOS (RIGHT) BY ERIC MACHE • PHOTO (TOP) COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

as part of their annual summer science fiction, horror and fantasy genre festival! So, I convinced Dario to not only attend the screenings of his *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* and *The Cat O' Nine Tails*, but to stick around and sign copies of Maitland McDonagh's just-published book *Broken Mirrors/ Broken Minds: The Dark Dreams of Dario Argento*. Among the Argento buffs mobbing the unexpected guest was Talking Heads frontman David Byrne! Fave director and fave singer both in the same place?! I had to pinch myself that night!

"The print, she's not so good, eh?" Dario said, elbowing me in the ribs as a badly-faded 16mm copy of *Four Flies* unspooled and seemed to deteriorate right before our eyes. "Whatsa this pink snow?" he asked, pointing at the screen.

I eventually put Dario on FANGORIA's Weekend of Horrors circuit, beginning in May 1992 at the LAX Airport Hyatt. He flew in to promote his first US-lensed film, *Trauma*. Though his English wavered, he quickly charmed the conventiongoers with his childlike manner and infectious charisma. From West Coast to East Coast (1999 and 2009) Fango shows, fans loved Dario's conviviality. He kissed some on both cheeks when they praised his films, and he even signed one guy's fast-food hamburger. He vowed to store it in his freezer forever!

"Few horror celebrities are as kind and gregarious as Dario Argento," reminisced attendee Jon Wilton. "He told me if he wasn't a film director, he would've been a serial killer," Fango-writer-turned-filmmaker Keith Bearden revealed after one of Argento's Big Apple appearances. "He was sweet and charming the whole time."

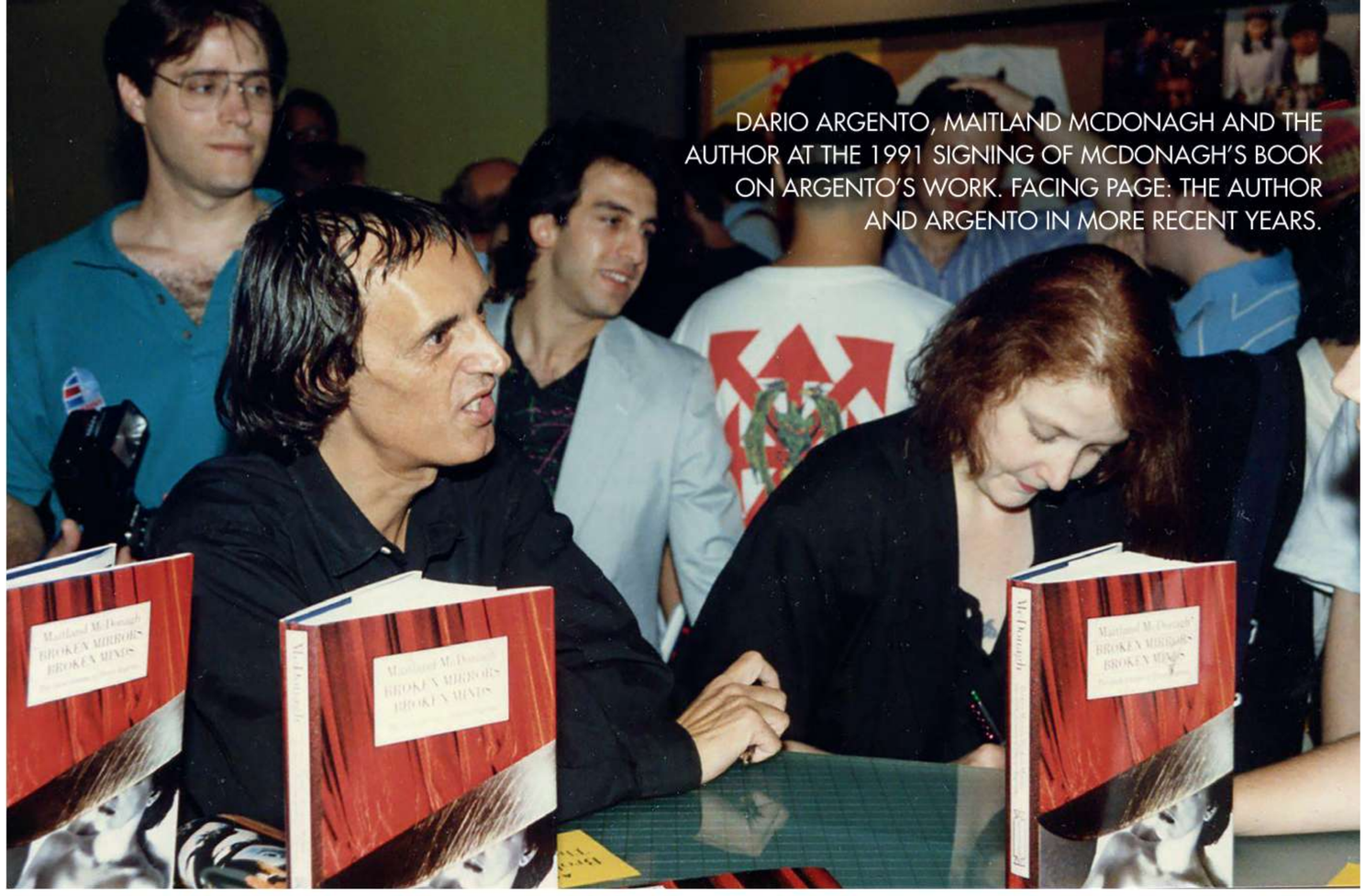
One of the highlights of my annual pilgrimages to Santa Monica's American Film Market (from 1998-2019) was the opportunity to catch Argento's latest efforts when they were being shopped around to international buyers. These theater screenings included his *giallo*-flavored policiers *Sleepless* and *The Card Player*, as well as the embarrassing *Mother of Tears* and *Dracula 3D*. When FANGORIA's various DVD labels were in full swing, we came thisclose to acquiring Argento's murderously madcap 1998 remake of *The Phantom of the Opera* for the US. It never happened, sadly.

Back in the pages of FANGORIA, Argento experts McDonagh and Alan Jones would astutely chronicle his *oeuvre* via exclusive set visits that took place all over the world. For me, I only interviewed Argento once. In 2003, we were both guests of Spanish horror star Paul Naschy at the Estepona Horror and Fantasy Film Festival, which Naschy had his wolf claws in. I had just been hired to serve as an executive producer and lead interviewer for Bravo's five-part series *The 100 Scariest Movie Moments*. I chose most of the titles featured, among them *Suspiria*, as well as George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* and Lamberto Bava's *Demons*, which Argento produced. So, when I realized that Dario and I would be partying together in this sunny Spanish town, I corralled him for an on-camera interview with a local camera team.

"Mas rapido! Mas rapido!" the pint-sized Dario barked at the terrorized crew while setting up. My impatient old friend preferred to be hanging by the pool than sitting down for a journalist, but he still gave me some good material.

At the Lincoln Center tribute, Dario premiered his most recent film, the *giallo* throwback *Dark Glasses*. The movie enjoyed numerous festival bookings and a short theatrical run from IFC before a much-ballyhooed streaming debut on Shudder. In recent years, bookshelves carried his *Fear: The Autobiography*, while director Gaspar Noé made Argento the lead actor in his 2021 French drama *Vortex*.

Luckily for us, the octogenarian still wants to direct more films and in 2022 announced that his next would be a Paris-set thriller to star Isabelle Huppert. As he showed in his wonderful Lincoln Center appearances, Dario Argento still has plenty of life left in him!



DARIO ARGENTO, MAITLAND MCDONAGH AND THE AUTHOR AT THE 1991 SIGNING OF MCDONAGH'S BOOK ON ARGENTO'S WORK. FACING PAGE: THE AUTHOR AND ARGENTO IN MORE RECENT YEARS.

ARGENTO AND FAN DAVID BYRNE.

the VIDEO EYE of the SON of DR. CYCLOPS

by Anthony Everitt

Editor's note: Readers of classic Fango will recall the legendary "Video Eye of Dr. Cyclops" column of home video reviews, and it is with great pride and respect for legacy that we restore and update it, now penned by the prolific prodigy of the ol' Doctor. (In reality, and never to be mentioned again: this column is indeed written by Anthony Everitt, son of Fango pioneer David Everitt. Special thanks to the great Tony Timpone for bringing Anthony in from the wilderness.) We're excited to be part of this beastly baton pass, as the Son of Dr. Cyclops continues his dad's macabre mission of retro reviews.

THE BLACK SLEEP (1956)

When I tell you that Bela Lugosi, Basil Rathbone, Lon Chaney Jr., John Carradine, and Akim Tamiroff all appeared together in one film, your initial reaction may be excitement. When I mention that it was released in 1956, that excitement may cool slightly. But then I ask, how could you expect a *Tor Johnson* appearance during the classic era? And aside from the depressing experience of watching an ailing Lugosi stumble his way through a wordless performance as a brain damaged goon, you'd be rewarded with a pretty fun, corny romp.

The premise is deceptively simple, updating the gothic mad scientist trope with some sensible lobotomy skepticism and adding a hint of Burke and Hare-esque hijinks. Predictably, the plot is driven by the villain's nutty, single-minded line of research, namely cutting up innocent people's brains in preparation for extracting a tumor from his wife (who looks radiant after vegetating in an 8-month coma — new beauty trend anyone?), and the subject of improvised brain surgery would have seemed very plausible to contemporary audiences. This is where the film successfully follows the gothic playbook, tapping into social anxieties while providing a sense of security by setting the action in an exotic time and location. Also, the operation scene is surprisingly graphic and convincing, thanks to the work of the all-but-invisible SFX master George Bau. The script mostly manages to satisfy audience expectations, even if it frequently defies logic. And after two viewings, Tamiroff's character's name remains a mystery (Udu? Udro? Udo?), but to be fair the actors probably didn't know either.

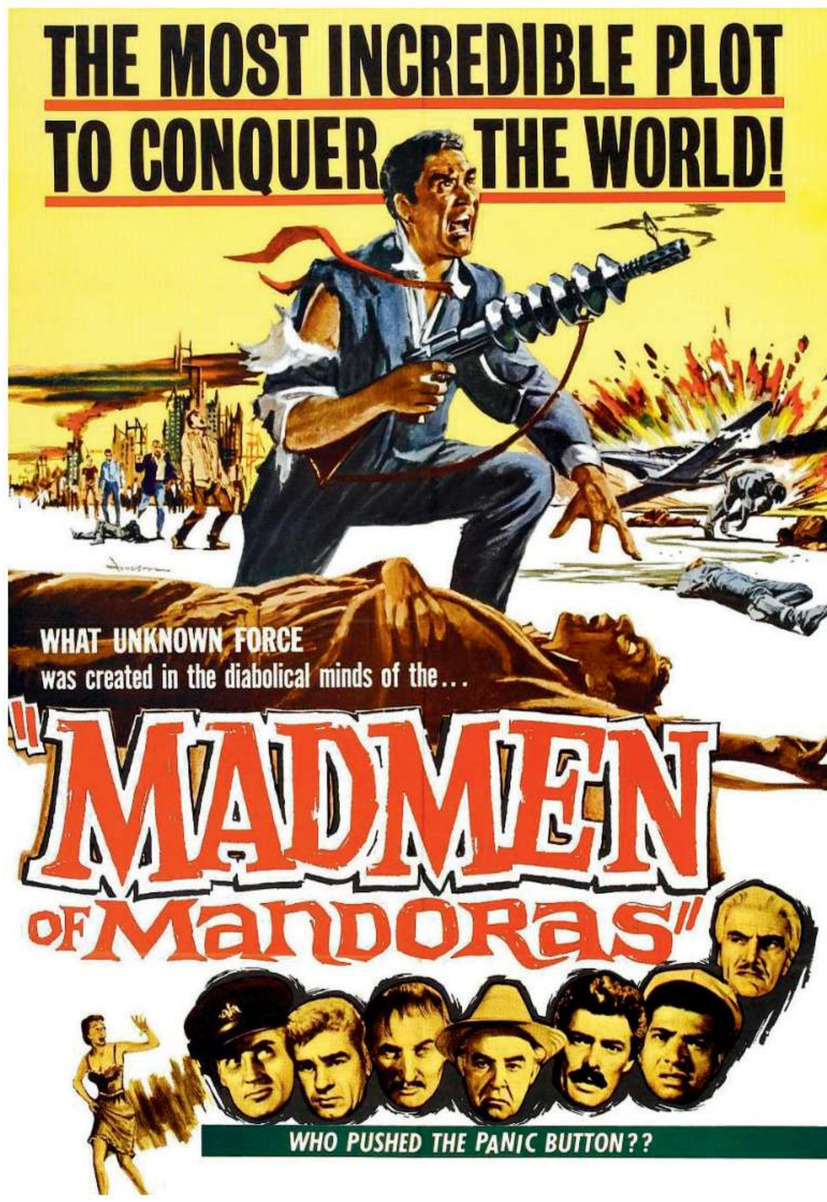
RISING FROM THE DEPTHS OF A BLACK HELL!
...AN ARMY OF MAMMOTH MONSTERS ATTACKS!
SEE! The diabolical doctor create super-monsters!
SEE! The death-struggle of man against ghoul!
SEE! The helpless young girl writhe in the grasp of a fiend!
THE BLACK SLEEP
Co-Starring
BASIL RATHBONE · AKIM TAMIROFF · LON CHANEY · JOHN CARRADINE · BELA LUGOSI
with Herbert RUDLEY · Patricia BLAKE · Phyllis STANLEY · Tor JOHNSON · Sally YARNELL · George SAWAYA · Claire CARLETON · Screenplay by John C. HIGGINS
Music by Les BAXTER · Executive Producer Aubrey SCHENCK · Produced by Howard W. KOCH · Directed by Reginald LeBORG · A BEL-AIR Production · Released thru United Artists
Copyright 1956 United Artists Corporation. Country of Origin U.S.A.
MAR. 27 1970
Property of National Screen Service Corp. Licensed for display only in connection with the exhibition of this picture at your theatre. Must be returned immediately thereafter.
56 \ 297

MADMEN OF MANDORAS/ THEY SAVED HITLER'S BRAIN (1963/1968)

Like me, you were probably thinking that after getting pulped by a bullet and incinerated, Hitler's brain may not have been quite up to snuff (not that it was much to begin with). Well, that just goes to show what you and I really know, because apparently 'Mr. H' was actually feeling great in his bunker; he even had the energy to mastermind an experimental surgery to remove and indefinitely sustain his own head apart from his body. Of course, you'll have to slog through about 40-plus exhausting minutes of domestic farce and intrigue to get there, but such builds character.

The most entertaining part is the obvious fact that somebody in 1968 wedged a completely superfluous, self-contained cop drama into the first 20 minutes of this 1962 B film. Unfazed by long shaggy hair, mustaches, baggy suits, and a conspicuously funky soundtrack, the "filmmakers" took a mediocre film and made it into something magical. I was particularly impressed with the avant-garde approach to composition; you'd be hard pressed to find a shot in the newer material that isn't almost immediately reframed with all the subtlety of a carnival ride.

But once the anachronistic subplot comes to its awkward close the starchiness gets smothering. Sure, there's a trained camera person and an ostensibly seasoned director at the helm, but the luster is gone. The dialogue and plotting are bad, but not comically so. The cute little Hitler head's random facial tics and mugging are nice, but overall the original footage is a much blander experience than the title would suggest.


THE MOST INCREDIBLE PLOT TO CONQUER THE WORLD!
WHAT UNKNOWN FORCE
was created in the diabolical minds of the...
"MADMEN OF MANDORAS"
WHO PUSHED THE PANIC BUTTON??

THE TERMINAL MAN (1974)

With a few exceptions Michael Crichton adaptations tend to be light on character and story and heavy on hard science. Sometimes that works, other times it just creates a convoluted mess that leaves you reconsidering those one to two hours of your life you'll never get back.

1974's *The Terminal Man* is not one of the best, but at least the premise has aged pretty well: A man who's had a severe brain injury, resulting in frequent episodes of uncontrollable violent behavior, volunteers for an experimental treatment involving the surgical implantation of electrodes into his brain. Unintended consequences ensue, of course, and instead of eliminating the problem he becomes a homicidal monster on the lam.

Visually, it's well made, with a claustrophobic, clinical style that suits the material. The problem is that, unlike Mr. Crichton, if you're reading this, chances are good that you aren't an MD and will likely freeze up a bit once the science jargon starts to fly. Whatever the fatal error was, it seems as though the man's brain becomes addicted to the electrical stimulations from the electrodes and starts to trigger more of them, increasing the rate of his blackouts. Whatever the case, the breakneck pacing is best used with a bit more discretion in a techno-thriller like this. I'm also bewildered by some of the choices in the script. For instance, the fact that he's a paranoiac who believes machines are acquiring sentience and trying to wipe out humanity really begs the question why he would agree to the procedure in the first place.

By Eric Vespe

Stephen King at the Oscars

If I challenged you to tell me how many Oscars Stephen King adaptations have raked in over the years, what would your guess be? Keep in mind I'm talking about the major categories as well as the smaller categories, like special effects, makeup, sound effects, etc.

(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:) SISSY SPACEK IN *CARRIE*; MORGAN FREEMAN IN *THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION*; THE CAST OF *STAND BY ME*; MICHAEL CLARKE DUNCAN IN *THE GREEN MILE*; OSCAR WINNER KATHY BATES IN *MISERY*.

The answer to that question is: one. Just a single win in the entire history of Stephen King movies, and that belongs to Kathy Bates for her career-defining role as Annie Wilkes in *Misery*.

That's insane, right?

By my count, King adaptations have garnered 15 Oscar nominations since *Carrie* introduced the master of horror to audiences in 1976, which is a paltry amount considering the stone-cold classics that have come from King's work.

Carrie got two acting nominations, a Best Actress nomination for Sissy Spacek and a Best Supporting Actress nomination for the late, great Piper Laurie, but it would be over ten years before another King movie would get a nomination.

Stand By Me was nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay and lost to the Merchant Ivory snoozer, *A Room with a View*. Four years later, Bates won the Best Actress Oscar, but that's the only category *Misery* was nominated in — nothing for director Rob Reiner, co-star James Caan, or legendary screenwriter William Goldman.

The remaining King nominations belong to Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption*, which was nominated in seven categories (Best Picture, Best Actor for Morgan Freeman, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Original Score, Best Cinematography, Best Sound Mixing, and Best Film Editing) and *The Green Mile* with four categories (Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor for Michael Clarke Duncan, Best Adapted Screenplay, and Best Sound Mixing).

There are some glaring omissions there that really underscore just how off-base the Academy Awards can be, so prepare your knives because you're about to get pissed off at the Academy yet again.

Of all the King adaptations ignored at the Oscars, *The Shining* is probably the biggest oversight. The movie didn't miraculously turn into a masterpiece over the years. It always was one, and the Academy should have recognized it even if the popular consensus at the time was that it was a misfire. The audience can afford time to let a movie grow on them, but the Academy should be held to a higher standard and not have to wait for the winds of popular thinking to change.

The Shining was nominated for two Razzies and zero Oscars yet went on to be recognized as one of the most iconic movies of all time. The Best Director field that year was pretty stacked, but was it so stacked that it justifies excluding Stanley Kubrick? Robert Redford won for *Ordinary People*, and he was up against David Lynch for *The Elephant Man*, Martin Scorsese for *Raging Bull*, Richard Rush for *The Stunt Man* (a straight-up wild nom that one has no choice but to respect), and Roman Polanski for *Tess*.

OF ALL THE KING ADAPTATIONS IGNORED AT THE OSCARS, *THE SHINING* IS PROBABLY THE BIGGEST OVERSIGHT.

Kubrick should have been in that conversation and would have been a far better fifth nomination than Polanski. While we're at it, it's beyond unacceptable that *The Shining* wasn't nominated for Best Art Direction. *Tess* won that category, yet I don't see *Tess* rugs selling all over the place 40 years later.

As far as acting nominations, there is plenty of King material that deserved its time in the sun. *The Dead Zone*, for instance. Christopher Walken and Martin Sheen both give standout performances. And while *Stand by Me* did get that screenplay nomination, Wil Wheaton and River Phoenix gave two of the best child performances in cinema history and were ignored.

Dolores Claiborne was and continues to be slept on, but Kathy Bates is just as good, if not better, in that film than she was in *Misery* and was totally forgotten come awards season.

Looking at the more recent King movies, I was a little shocked that 2017's *It* was totally snubbed. I wouldn't expect *It* to be in the Best Picture conversation, but how was it not nominated for Best Costume Design or Best Makeup and Hairstyling? Gary Oldman's fat suit in *Darkest Hour* won the makeup category that year.

The Oscars have always had a hard time with horror. There are a few times where they embraced the genre, like when *Silence of the Lambs* swept all the top categories and more recently when *Get Out* won for Best Original Screenplay, but for the most part, they ignore horror, so I guess I should be happy that King adaptations have still managed to grab 15 nominations over the years — although only three of the 15 were for horror movies.

I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but the Academy needs to lighten up and realize that there's more to cinema than biopics and character dramas. Whether you hate them or not, the Oscars still wield a lot of influence. Maybe not as much as they used to, but nominations still matter.

To bring it back to King, *The Shawshank Redemption* was ignored upon release, but after its nominations, it became a massive hit on home video. The landscape has changed radically since the '90s, but the Oscars still have great power to elevate movies of all forms, especially genres that are still seen as lesser despite being the most dependable at the box office.

May we see the day when Toni Collette isn't overlooked for her ballsy, tour de force turn in *Hereditary* just because it happens to be in a horror film. The Oscars' influence may dwindle into nothing before that day arrives, but one can still hope.

You can listen to Scott Wampler (@ScottWamplerRIP) and Eric Vespe (@EricVespe) every Wednesday on THE KINGCAST (@Kingcast19), a Stephen King podcast for Stephen King obsessives, brought to you by the FANGORIA Podcast Network.

Illustration by Chris Barnes

Fiction returns to Fango with this creepy-crawler from the author of The Remaking, Whisper Down the Lane *and* Ghost Eaters.

FICTION

I understand what daycare said. Miss Janelle can wave her red flag all she wants – it's not her place to diagnose our son. Yes – Carter's mind wanders. Yes – he has a harder time focusing on what's in front of him or playing with other kids. That doesn't mean he's on the spectrum.

He's just shy. Carter will come out of his shell eventually.

Biting another child is bad, absolutely. I one-hundred percent agree. But he's three. We can't all be angels.

We'll just enroll Carter at another daycare. What gives Miss Janelle the authority to say he has a development disorder? I don't care if she's dealt with a million kids before, it's not her place to tell us what she senses in our son. This is not autism.

I know exactly what this is. Where it comes from.

It came from me.

When I was five, I had a hermit crab. Hermy was my first pet. He lived in a ventilated plastic terrarium about the size of a lunchbox, transparent all the way around, with a convenient carrying handle up top. I hefted Hermy just about wherever I went. There was a pop-top easy-flip lid by the handle – *the feeding window*, the instructions called it. I'd open it up and scoop Hermy out with my bare hand. Let him crawl across my bedroom carpet for a while.

You're free, Hermy, I'd always call out. *Freeeee!*

Hermy was my friend. The only real friend I had back then. His shell was a cream-colored conch, while his delicate, spiraling-curved exoskeleton had a coral hue to it. The most I ever spotted of his body was the front, his head and claws, feathered antennas tapping at the air.

It's okay, I'd say. *You can come out. It's just you and me, Hermy.*

He'd been a gift from my mom. My first stab at caregiving. Even then, I felt the weight of Hermy's life on my shoulders.

You hungry, Hermy?

I'd drop a blueberry from my own afternoon snack. We shared everything. He'd clasp that blueberry in his claws, flexing his mouthparts, the maxillipeds branching out and tearing at the fruit's flesh.

Yummy in the tummy! We want you to stay nice and healthy, Hermy!

I loved him. I really did. Which is strange, when you consider hermit crabs are emotionless creatures. Cold, black eyes.

Actually, I take that back. Hermy expressed one emotion:

Fear.

Hermy was terrified of just about everything. Whenever danger presented itself – *shwoooomp!* – he retreated into his shell, barricading himself behind his tiny, pink claws.

Don't be scared, Hermy. I'm not gonna hurt you, I promise…

Sometimes he came out. Most times, he just hid, curled into a tiny ball of himself.

In his shell.

I'd keep his terrarium next to my bed, on my nightstand table. Mom would tuck me in, kiss my forehead and turn off my light. I'd fall asleep to the sound of Hermy rummaging around.

Goodnight, Hermy…

Hermit crabs are scavengers. They occupy abandoned mollusk shells. Their fragile bodies taper off to this slender tip – an asymmetric abdomen – curling in like a question mark. They're always hopping from one shell to the next. That's why you'll see a hermit crab living in a Pepsi can or even an abandoned doll's head. They need to move into bigger digs every now and then. They remodel their shells when they first slip in by hollowing them out, custom-fitting their new home by chemically carving out the interiors of their shell.

Hermy had the same mottled conch since I'd gotten him, a whole month by then.

Until one night.

My parents were hosting a dinner party. I was the only kid, stranded at a table full of dull adult conversation, so boredom crept up pretty quick. I begged Mom if I could be excused.

Sure thing, hon, she said.

I rushed upstairs to my bedroom. Closed the door. I took Hermy's terrarium in both of my hands and gently placed it on the floor. I popped open the lid and scooped Hermy out. He was tucked into his shell, hiding from me. Hermy was just as shy as I was. That's why I liked him. Whenever anyone got too close – even me – he'd retreat into that tiny shell, curling into himself.

I wished I had a shell like Hermy's. Something I could sink into.

To hide inside.

But something was wrong. Hermy wasn't easing out from his shell. Normally by now his pink limbs would seep out from his hiding spot and away he'd go, crawling across the carpet, scavenging the shag for food. But Hermy was still tucked in. He wouldn't come out and play.

You okay, Hermy? I caught a faint whiff coming off his shell. *What's wrong?*

Everybody says when you bring a seashell up to your ear, you can hear the sea. Waves crashing against the beach. The hollow thwonk of the roiling tide sweeps over your eardrum.

I could make out this tiny scratching sound. Just the slightest grind in Hermy's conch.

Skrch-skrch-skrch.

I brought the shell up to my ear for a closer listen.

Skrch-skrch-skrch.

It sounded like a pencil sharpener. The plastic kind you pinch between your fingers, a thin razor blade embedded deep into its casing. With each twist of your wrist: *skrch-skrch-skrch.*

I listened and listened and then –

skrch

– I felt a pinch. This searing snick next to my head. Hermy went straight for the tragus, that tiny divot of cartilage the pops out from your external ear. A sand dune of flesh.

Ow ow ow…

I let go of Hermy, but Hermy didn't let go of me. He held on to my ear, clinching the skin so tight, I swear his claw went all the way through the cartilage. He pierced my ear.

I never screamed so loud in my life. Still, Hermy wouldn't let go. I grabbed hold of the hull of his home in my hand, cupping the shell in my palm like I was gripping a doorknob, and simply giving the slowest-but-steadiest tug I possibly could. I felt the cartilage drag along with his claw, pulling, almost peeling, off from the rest of my skull.

I screamed even louder.

I ran downstairs, into the dining room. All these mortified adults took one look at me, this beet-red boy screaming bloody murder, a hermit crab dangling from the side of his head.

Get him off get off get him ooooofffff… The side of my neck felt warm. Wet. Blood dribbled down my cheek, gathering at my chin. *Please please pleeeeeease get him ooooofffff…*

Mom rushed me into the bathroom. *It's okay*, she kept repeating as she examined the damage, taking my head into her hands and turning it left and right. *It's okay, it's okay…*

She tugged. So did Hermy. So did my ear.

My shrieks lifted in pitch. *Please mommy pleeeeeease…*

I'm trying, I—

Mom leapt back. Gasped. Her hand was held out, palm facing upward. Hermy's shell settled against her skin, covered in blood.

Empty. All I saw was a hollow grotto, the shell's open mouth frozen in a rotund 'O.'

Where did Hermy go?

Hermit crabs just get too big for their britches, hon, Mom explained once I calmed down. *They slip out from their shells and search for a new one…* Even I heard the doubt in her voice.

Had he fallen to the floor and scuttled away? Was he still hiding in the house? Crawling through the carpet? Was he tucked into my clothes?

I checked my pillow, shaking it.

Nothing.

I lay in bed for hours, wide awake, staring up at the ceiling. I kept waiting for him to skitter across my leg or belly or somewhere. Do something. He couldn't have just vanished.

Skrch-skrch-skrch…

There was that familiar sound of pencil shavings, much louder now. More resonant. It wasn't so much that I heard the scraping sound as felt it deep within me.

Skrch-skrch-skrch…

Mom tossed out Hermy's terrarium. The family accepted the sad fact that Hermy must've died somewhere in our house. Mom would find his shriveled body while vacuuming one day. She'd lean under the living room couch, on the prowl for dust bunnies and – *schwoomp*! – Hermy's desiccated exoskeleton would get sucked into the vacuum's funnel.

But I kept hearing him. In my head. Behind my migraines.

Skrch-skrch-skrch.

I started going through what Mom now refers to as my *stormy period*. Most days, I just stayed in my room. In bed, all balled up into myself. I seemed distracted. Unable to pay attention to what my teachers were saying. I became moody. Ill-tempered. I barely talked.

In science, our class looked at a diagram of the human ear and all of its various tubes and canals and I swear I was looking at Hermy's tenderly tapering exoskeleton curled into itself. The cochlea. The vestibular nerve. The tympanic cavity. It all looked like a fragile parasite to me.

Skrch-skrch-skrch…

First thing I did when I came home was grab a flashlight and run to the bathroom. I leaned in as close as I could to the mirror. I flicked on the flashlight. Shined it down my throat.

Aaaaah… I spotted my uvula dangling down, that pink nob bobbing up and down.

Did it just blink?

There. Where the shadows met flesh.

Feathered antennas.

Just as quickly as I spotted those slender, black eyestalks – *schwoooomp*! – they retreated deeper into my throat, sinking down my esophagus.

I saw it. Saw *him*.

Skrch…

There's a hermit crab in my head. Hermy made himself at home, nestled into my nasal cavity. Curled behind my eyeballs. Whenever his exoskeleton shifted – *skrch* – I'd get the most piercing migraines.

I want you out, I'd mutter to myself whenever I brushed my teeth. *Get out. Now.*

Hermy never listened, no matter how much I begged. He wouldn't let me go.

We went to college. We moved out from my parents' home. We found a home of our own. We met you. We married you. We fell in love, the three of us. We made a family.

It's never been me, hon. It's always been us. Hermy's the one making the decisions.

Living my life.

In my skull.

It took twenty-five years before Hermy finally outgrew me. I sensed a shift around Carter's first birthday. There was a slight odor to my breath that hadn't been there before.

He needed a new shell.

Hermy guided me to Carter's room. Right up to his crib. He was taking a nap. I leaned all the way over the railing, an inch from his head. I could kiss our son's fontanelle, I was so close.

My lips hovered over Carter's ear. His left. A cone-shaped canal.

Skrch-skrch-skrch.

I opened my mouth. My lower jaw unhinged a bit, then a lot, and then a lot-lot, sockets popping.

Skrch-skrch-skrch.

Hermy was leaving, easing free from my nasal cavity and slipping across my oropharynx.

I felt him lunge over my tongue.

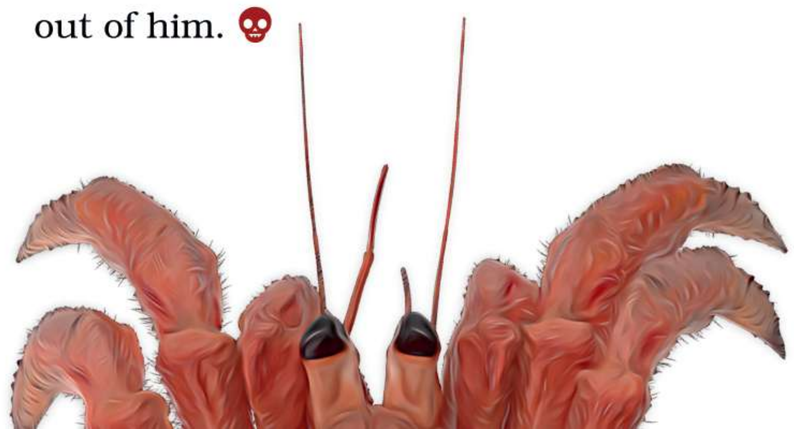
Unspooling.

Hermy reached for my lips. For our son. Letting me go. Saying goodbye to this home and moving into a new one. I felt his antennas poke out first. Then his eyestalks. One claw, then the other. His head pushed past my lips, my mouth birthing his slippery pink exoskeleton. His body unfurled from my cranium, my mouth, my life, and all I remembered was when I'd first gotten Hermy, how I'd take him out from his terrarium, place him on the carpet and say:

You're free, Hermy! Freeee!

Glancing down, what I saw almost looked more like an old man in miniature to me. This shriveled, elderly thing. Its diminished legs were twined together in a withered knot.

Carter is never going to be like other children, but he's still our boy. Our son. We'll get him back one day, I promise. Whenever Hermy finally grows out of him. 💀



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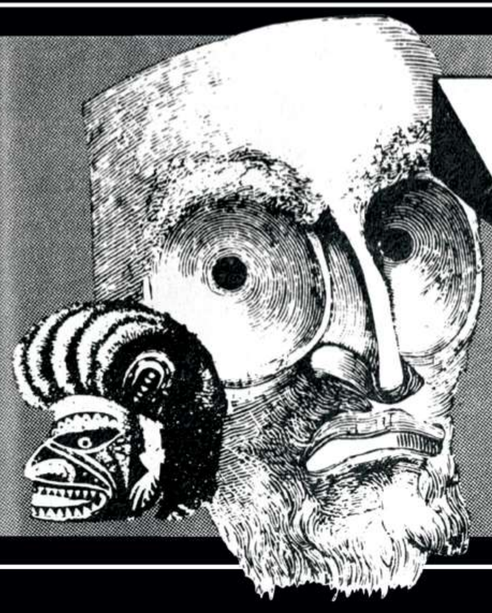

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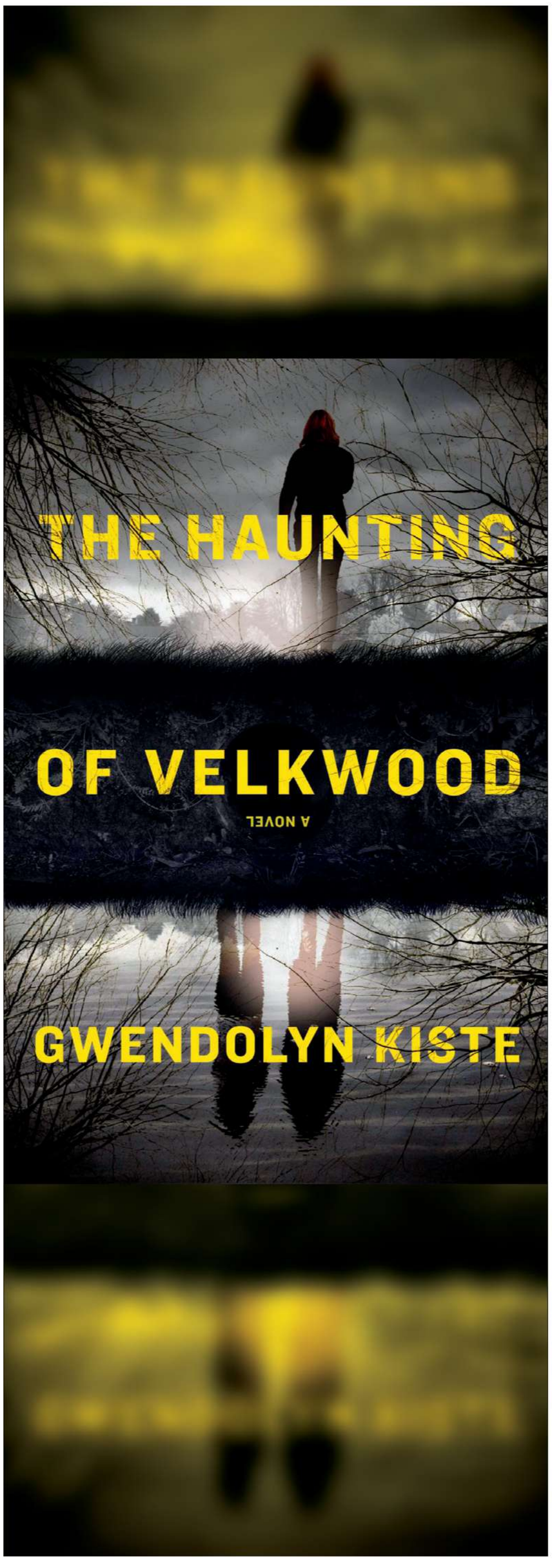
BY AHLISSA EICHHORN



THE HAUNTING OF VELKWOOD

DUE OUT:
03/05/2024

AUTHOR:
Gwendolyn Kiste

PUBLISHER:
Saga Press

Twenty years ago, a block of houses and their inhabitants disappeared overnight. The phenomenon captured the world's attention, coaxing fruitless investigations into the invisible barrier that isolated Velkwood street. No one was ever able to breach it, no one except for the three young women who escaped from it that decisive night. Now, strapped for cash and long estranged from her two childhood friends, Talitha Velkwood is asked to return to her old neighborhood. This new group of paranormal researchers starve for answers about life beyond the veil, but the task is much bigger than that for Talitha. Stepping through the barrier and into the past means discovering what horrors have happened to the loved ones she left in it, and what the Velkwood Vicinity wants from those who survived it.

The Haunting of Velkwood shimmers with the uncanny. The tone is immediately unsettling and made supernatural by the concept of an anomalous forcefield. The small-town setting and coming-of-age backstory induce a sense of familiar dread that looms over the entire book. The ghosts themselves are more abstract. Are they mere memories replaying on a doomed track, or hallucinations only the three survivors can see? There's a chance they're not even dead, but instead stuck in a purgatory that goes beyond religious affiliations. It's that curious questioning that makes this the most unique haunt story in years. For the titular characters of Talitha, Bret, and Grace, the monster is home. It's a domineering presence that only devours those who dwell in it. Others can't see, or won't see, their desperation to get out. Shame was the main motivator for this group's need to escape — shame of being victimized and shame of loving.

The reading experience felt cathartic at times because of how real these characters were. They reacted based on their traumas and voiced thoughts that could be your own. Their hurt and fears came alive on the pages. Kiste seems to deal best with these painful emotions. Her prose chisels at the stoniest places in us and shapes them into something we can mull over. She writes about the human experience with an inclusive voice, welcoming more bisexual and queer characters into the fold with each publication.

This kind of ghost isn't centralized to one building or a street in a book. It's a draining entity experienced by any reader whose future has been cruelly controlled by their past. *The Haunting of Velkwood* transcends tropes by mirroring the trepidation that's already within you. It's a story about haunted people, of families broken by prejudice and abuse. It'll make you wish there was a way to confront the past while finding a tool to instantly exorcise it once and for all.

IT'S JANUARY, AND THE SENSE OF RENEWAL IS ALIVE AND SCREAMING IN THE NIGHTMARE LIBRARY. No, not quite the "new year means new stuff" mindset but the allure of newfangled ways to tell classic tales. We're talking about original takes from unfamiliar names that make your heart palpitate, the shining proclamation that we aren't cursed to repeat and recycle. We're raising a glass to novels that can change the expectations readers have of horror. Two such books lie below, and they bleed right from the heart.

DIAVOLA

DUE OUT:
03/26/2024

AUTHOR:
Jennifer Thorne

PUBLISHER:
Tor Nightfire

For two weeks, Anna and her family will unwind at a remote villa in Italy for their annual getaway, and she's dreading every second of it. Getting along with her flock has never been easy. It's a fool's errand to try and make her parents understand her work or life choices. Reconnecting with her needy brother is cumbersome, and tiptoeing around her control-freak sister is exhausting. She thinks she can endure the trip with enough wine and time alone sketching. Still, she can't quite ignore how weird the rental is. Why aren't they allowed into the tower room? And why is no one else talking about the noises in the night or the feeling they're being watched? As the days tick by and the glasses empty, Anna is confident that there's an Old World evil circling in on her — even if her family thinks she's just being "Anna."

Thorne speaks to the hearts of all the black sheep out there with her latest page turner. Anna is an unmarried, childless artist with no apologies to spare for her lifestyle or sexuality. That formula can trigger the hell out of some people and *Diavola* (devil in Italian) has a blast with it. The dialogue between family members is spot-on. Their resentment can't help but spill out every time they speak. They perfectly capture toxic relationship dynamics and induce major anxiety throughout the book. The scares are in your head as much as they're in your face. All the characters experience slamming doors, rearranged furniture, and spectral visions, but only one will admit that any of it is happening.

Denial is the broad theme here, and it's used to infuriating affect. The gaslighting and faultless attitudes of the family makes them more damaging than the ghosts at times. The actual villain is a vile one. It alludes to painted portraits of Florentine women and adds grotesque flair to the plot. Yet, it's scoffed at by those who refuse to believe in it and yelled at by the one who does. This kind of levity was a delightfully unexpected element, especially with the Gothic overtones. The snarky protagonist deflected nearly every uncomfortable moment with jokes, making her relatable while also diffusing the extra freaky moments.

Diavola has no right to be this weird, scary, and funny. The conversational tone makes it go down smooth, even if the story goes to some off-kilter places. Despite the frights and tension that piles up and up, it still finds time to inspire. Readers may find the courage to rattle the chains of familial bonds and set the record straight. Or if that's a bit too brave, they'll certainly be heartened to live as authentically themselves as their demons will allow.

Contributors' Crypt

Here's where you can follow some of our contributors on Instagram. Instagram is still okay, right?

Sean Abley ..... @seanabley

Meredith Borders ..... @mereborders

Barbara Crampton .. @barbaracrampton

Ahlissa Eichhorn .. @hauntedbydeadlines

Travis Johnson ..... @unreliable_narrator

Stephen Graham Jones ..... @stephengrahamjones

Angel Melanson ..... @horrorgirlprobs

Ve Neill ..... @therealve

Travis Stevens ..... @travisstevens

Michael Varrati ..... @michaelvarrati

Scott Wampler ..... @mayorofdoorcity

Things to Come

What will we SPRING on you in FANGORIA #23? Look for gems like LATE NIGHT WITH THE DEVIL, the spider horror INFESTED, TRIM SEASON, THE FIRST OMEN and hopefully the return of that rascal CHUCKY! The blood is blooming in this issue — on stands in April!

CLASSIFIED AD VAULT

Hi Emma Shaw, your Austin Horror Club family misses you! Big hugs, Amiee

I would like to thank Simi because she is new to FANGORIA and she has been amazing! - Simi N

If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. - Abraham Maslow

Thanks for keeping me alive one more year, spank. I love you more'n anything <3

Welcome to the chaos, Arvinda! Buckle up…

Sam your mum and dad's favourite boy. love you buggies XXXOOO

TONY! Give Marguerite a HUG for me! Your old #1 FANGO iNTERN, sHANE !!!!

Cult Classic Club at Enzian Theater. For a good time call Mary Lou 588-6558 - @121hoot

My Dinner With Andre meets Jason Lives? Watch Camp Killer on Tubi!

Never let physical media die.

Check out the Spooky Doings podcast. Improv comedians conduct interviews with horror luminaries, discuss films, talk newbies into indulging more macabre & more! Available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts & Podbean

The New Bible by Hoodie Hilltop out 11/23 on all major streaming platforms!

Brian & Peter! CONGRATs on your WereWOLF "Oscar!"… I mean COVER!! All the BLOODY BEST! Yr PAL, sHANE

Blood, guts, and gore is on the menu at The Slasher Girls Podcast! A podcast that focuses exclusively on your favorite (and not so favorite) slasher films across the eras! @slashergirlspod is available on Apple and Spotify podcasts now!

Vannah! So proud of you and so happy to call you a friend <3 - R.

We'll miss you forever, Miri Wolf. Sure wish you were here for this snowfall.

What happened to Francisco Peppermints?

Why hasn't Count Fangor had a bigger resurgence outside of a pic on this page? He's probably going to get featured on this page…

Want to read a weird-ass tale of undead knights, sex, and blood? Check out *Blood of the Ghastly Dead* and more at linktr.ee/KellyMHudson

Craving a crucible of horrors for your evening, dear reader? Well, look no further than Cass Clarke's debut queer horror novella THE CARETAKER — what Adams Family Films' Toby Poser called a "read that chips away, cracked nails and all, at what it means to love, be loved, and let go." bit.ly/3sTYLKc

Check out Ryan C. Bradley's debut novella Saint's Blood! Misery meets the Goonies with a supernatural twist.

Torgo!

"A quick but great and intense short story! " "A highly captivating story which includes all the ingredients in addition to a breathtaking end twist!" Get the short here: https://bit.ly/3R61kkq

Big thanks to the entire IT'S A WONDERFUL KNIFE team for transporting us to a killer Christmas wonderland in mid-March and giving us a peek behind the tree. Congrats, and happy New Year! - Angel

SEEKING: Full-time custodian for regular upkeep of ooze crusted wall hole of mysterious origin. Must be comfortable with late hours and true crime tourism. Please be local or within driving distance of Amityville, NY.

Keep circulating the tapes.

Read more horror. Watch more horror.

FANGORIA COMMUNITY
We recently added a new perk for subscribers in the form of a private online community. Fango's subscriber group gathers online regularly to talk horror and to share opinions, collections, memories and recommendations. The group also enjoys exclusive access to online Q&As with filmmakers and horror personalities, and indulges their love of horror without the toxic aftertaste of social media. We're having fun in there. You should come hang.
Want to join? Subscribe at FANGORIA.com

COLD SWEATS & SCREAMIN' T-SHIRTS!

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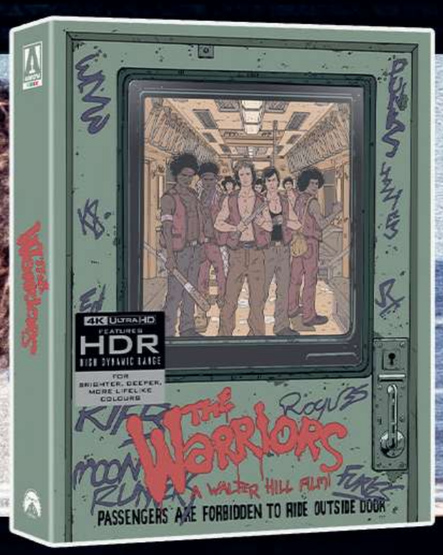
ARROW

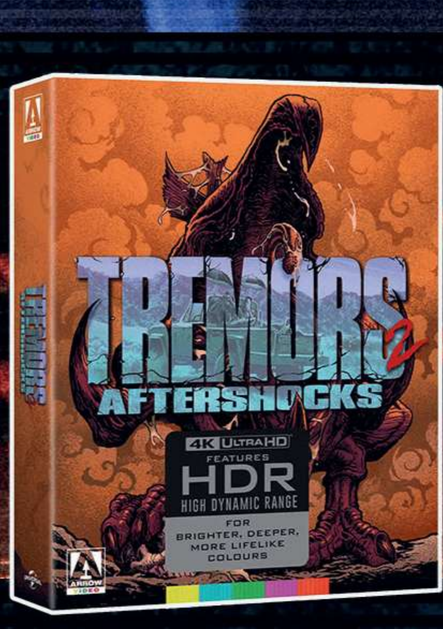
PRESENTS

REWIND, REDISCOVER

GOODBYE, JANUARY BLUES



This New Year, dive back in time to Arrow Video's key releases from 2023. Choose from brand new 4K UHD editions of restorations of *The Last House on the Left*, *Ringu*, *The Warriors*, Blu-ray exclusives such as *The House That Screamed* and *Lovers Lane* or UHD home video debuts from *Tremors 2: Aftershocks* to *Carlito's Way*. Uncover cult cinema packed with extras expertly arranged. New Year, Same Cult.



ARROW VIDEO

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